Kaze no Stigma

Volume 3: The Confession Under The Moon

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Meeting Underneath The Moonlight..... 2
Chapter 2: Small Client..... 54
Chapter 3: The Person One Must Protect 104
Chapter 4: Each And Everyone's Determination .. 170
Chapter 5: Dreams And Reality 214
Chapter 6: Confession Underneath
The Moonlight..... 286
Epilogue 399

Chapter 1: Meeting Underneath The Moonlight

Part 1

In the beginning of the New Year, a few days after the start of the new semester…

In the classroom of the sixth year, class two of the Metropolitan Cosei Elementary School, an event that already became the established afterschool practice, began.

"Ren-kun!"

"Ren!"

A short girl and a boy with an outstanding build each grab a hand of a boy, so cute you could mistake him for a girl. The girl and the large built boy exchange a sublime threatening glance for a second and right away avert their eyes, as if to say: "I saw something dirty."

"Ren-kun, let's go have tea on the way home."

"Let's go play games, Ren!"

The invitations were issued perfectly simultaneously.

"Ah…well…" The bewildered cute boy – Kannagi Ren, twelve years old – inserts himself where these two's glances scatter sparks. The clash was inevitable.

"Which one do you think wins today?"

"That would be Kannon, right? Up until today she holds complete victory."

"That girl, she doesn't have leniency."

"No, anytime now, Serisawa is going to get angry for real, don't you think? Up until now, he was going easy on her, right?"

Although abnormal, their struggle is extreme. The boy and the girl trying to gain Kannagi Ren's favor and his heart, neither can be called a standard primary school student.

Serisawa Tatsuya – 180 centimeters tall and a physique matching that height, the boy is endowed with physical strength.

Suzuhara Kannon – the girl has both cute looks suitable for a flower and a cruel, wicked personality appropriate for her artillery name.

The struggle between these two completely exceeds the primary school level. Fighting each other with a raging power, almost like a windstorm, and a

devil-like heartless craft, class 6-2 is changed into a battlefield. Towards the overwhelming heroicness, the pupils that happened to be present caused uproar but got used to it after three days. As for this ordinary one part thing nowadays, they are enjoying this pleasant exhibition.

"Serisawa! Don't lose today!"

"No! If such a gorilla is his company, Ren-kun will amount to nothing!"

"Whether she likes it or not…Kannon's opponent is pretty determined, huh?"

In the center of the pupils quarreling to their heart's content, Kannon and Serisawa are only staring at each other. Not to overlook even the most trivial behavior, they are watching for an unguarded moment without even blinking. The class is overflowing with this tense atmosphere. The noisy pupils were engulfed in it and gradually lowered their tone.

"…ts!"

Destroying the equilibrium, Serisawa ran, but not towards Kannon. His destination was the noisy boys –

"…eh?"

Ren, completely left outside the event, stared in amazement at Serisawa rushing towards him almost like a bull. It seems that he abandoned the fight with Kannon, having the intention to withdraw from the battlefield after seizing Ren. Serisawa thought this through! – if the students were to compare these two's combat abilities, Serisawa overwhelms Kannon. And yet, in spite of this, until today why did his defeats keep piling up?

Kannon is weaker than Serisawa. At the very least, the teachers and parents don't have a particle of doubt about that obvious fact. That recognition places great restraints on Serisawa. If a young man, towards a delicate girl – and with a construction like Serisawa's – were to exert violence, it's been decided that the young man will be blamed, no matter the reason. To say nothing of the fact that the opponent is that Kannon. If she were to make a fuss, she is quite capable of obliterating Serisawa's social status. Because he knew this, Serisawa can't win without moderating at any cost his offence – contrastive to Kannon's challenging, no-mercy attack – this is why he can only continue to repel it.

Therefore, he considered this. To be able to accomplish his goal, he cannot knock Kannon down. Before the girl's intention of acquiring Ren, there aren't many obstacles to block his way. There is no need to fight directly. It's okay to ignore her. Because, the person he is wishing for is right in front of his eyes.

"Ren!"

Serisawa faced the petrified boy and extended his big hand with all his heart.

"Fuuuuu…you can use your head a little, can't you?"

On the other hand, Kannon was persistently calm. To begin with, something even Serisawa would think of, it would be impossible for her not to notice it first. Again, this time's conduct was within her expectation. Without being disconcerted, she started running. She was faster than Serisawa. The way things are now, she can be shaken off. But, Serisawa's aim is not just flight. It's a withdrawal from the battlefield by taking back Ren. That's why, at least the moment when he captures Ren, his speed will decline. Then, the capture.

This is not the result of luck of wishful thinking. After mutually understanding the motion, an adjust-

ment of the relation between the locations of the three parties can be made – When Serisawa moves, Kannon responds to that – all the pupils think so. But only Kannon knew. She was the only one perfectly grasping this setting.

"S-Serisawa-kun…"

Being pulled up against his will, as one would expect, Ren is resisting. From the impatient Serisawa's awareness, Kannon's existence vanished.

"I got you!"

Facing Serisawa's turned back, using the hind foot, she takes the last step. And then –

Zudan!

Breaking into a rush by kicking the floor, a roar-like explosion can be heard. Simultaneously, Serisawa's figure disappears from Ren's field of vision. In the place Serisawa should have been a moment before, is now Kannon's appearance from behind. Something previously seen on TV, billiard techniques come to mind. This is stop shot. The cue ball hit by the player hands over all the kinetic energy by clashing into the target ball and at the position where the target ball was, it suddenly stops.

Just like this.

Kannon lowered herself greatly extending her leg and pushing forward her elbow. That appearance, not really fitting with her one piece uniform, looked amazingly good.

"Th – the top back gate elbow move…", someone muttered, almost groaning. The Eight Extremities Fists – a form of martial arts that became well known because of a certain beat'-them-up game, among these, this is a technique especially well known. The Shin leg movement was effective, naturally being a certain kill hit. The blown-away Serisawa, was for a second time buried between the desks. Unlike the previous time, there is no sign of movement.

This was a stupefying, perfect KO.

"…fuah," Kannon let out a breath and straightened her pose. She tucked the hair on her cheeks back and slowly turned around.

"So, let's go, Ren-kun."



The atmosphere of violence from several days minutes ago left no traces. A glittery smiling face was there. Kannon gently took Ren's arm, in fact with a vigor that doesn't allow resistance – and forcibly dragged him along. A reckless enough person to obstruct it was already nowhere to be found.

Part 2

When Ren was eventually released from Kannon it was already past 7 p.m. As a matter of course, during this time they didn't just drink tea. Having been made to accompany her endlessly at shopping and karaoke and the like, Ren couldn't run from Kannon's devil paw (Serisawa joke) pressing closer with no regard for the public gaze, without concentrating all his power.

"…I'm worn-out."

The sun already set. While walking alone on the street at night, Ren let out a mutter packed with many thoughts.

It's not like he hates Kannon. Rather, he harbors friendly feelings towards her. And in addition to that, if he were pushed to say it in less ambiguous terms, he can clearly declare those feelings as "like".

However.

Ren's like and Kannon's like are completely different. Because he knows that, he can't help but be troubled by it. He didn't experience the emotion called "love" until now.

First on the list, among the members of the family there are a lot of people he likes. But, using an extreme argument, the emotion felt for them all is the same. The emotion is strong. There is also a priority. However, there is decidedly no contradiction between the affection felt for those countless people.

That hot emotion for that around the world one-irreplaceable person's existence, he doesn't know it. For this reason, towards that girl trying to force that feeling onto him, he can't help but feel perplexed.

Actually, why is it me…?

Ren never thought he possesses that manly appeal. The girly features and a personality weak under pressure, he cannot think of nothing but "minus" ingredients for a man.

If it's about a "fine man", it must be a man undoubtedly similar to big brother. Lately, he frequently compares himself with his big brother.

Yagami Kazuma.

A well trained body. A shaped mind. Owning the unshakeable title of the absolute strongest man – Ren is considerably glorifying him. Nevertheless, the

brother he met after four years, he seemed exactly like the ideal embodiment of the boy.

Someday, I want to become like big brother…

With a child-like innocence, Ren is yearning after Kazuma. Towards the inanimate nature of cutting everything down, without concerning oneself about it, for the sake of one's important person, toward the man who thinks one's gentleness is nothing but naiveté, a merit that ought to be learned can be felt. The weight of the chosen act, the significance of cutting down everything, Ren didn't understand it yet.

"…huh?"

On the way returning home, it happened when approaching the entrance of a public park. Having a faint, uncomfortable feeling, Ren peered inside the park.

"…a singing voice?"

It was a children's park, established in a quiet, residential area. The place had a clandestine character because of a few people with rude conduct and after dark the place was completely empty. However, it seems there is an exception tonight. The singing audible voice coming from inside the shade of the trees

was unmistakably human and, in addition to that, belonged to a young girl.

Being charmed by the firm, crystal-like soprano, Ren walked into the park. There was no need to search for it. At the moment he entered the park, an extremely violent compelling force bound Ren's consciousness.

The jungle-gym's highest step. The slender body standing on tip-toes on the pole, the figure of a girl sonorously singing. In this cold weather she is wearing one white, thin dress. The wind is playing with her soft, wavy black hair stretching below her back, the girl is innocently singing.

In the sky is the close, slightly chipped circle of the moon. The descending white light shines on the young lady.

"…"

From Ren's awareness, the entire world lost its meaning. Reflected in his eyes are the sparkling moon and the maiden's shape blessed by the moon.

Throb.

The heart starts beating very loudly. A conspicuously great pulsation. Even without proof, Ren firmly

believes he heard that sound. He can sense the blood running through the blood vessels.

Throb, throb.

The all too excited blood flow makes his limbs vibrate. The heartbeats resound deafeningly in his ears. And yet the girl's voice naturally penetrates into his hearing. Is she offering her song to the moon or is she praying? That shape, sincere like a shrine maiden serving God is too pure, too noble.

"I…what am I looking at?"

A guilty feeling as if peaking at a miracle swept over his heart. Nevertheless, he couldn't take his eyes off it. Even to think about separation is unbearable. The things reflected in his eyes are the glittery moonlight and the figure of a maiden blessed by it…

"…eh…"

Is this real? Is she human? Or an angel or a fairy … or else a devil?

"…Hey…"

I don't understand…I don't understand anything!

"I said hey!"

"Waah!?"

Because of the large voice shouted from overhead, Ren finally calmed down. Looking up, almost right overhead is the above mentioned girl. The jungle-gym was supposed to be more then ten meters away, it seemed he was stepping up to it from within his consciousness.

This, this is bad…

While fascinated by the seemingly puzzled young girl overlooking him, Ren was stunned from the bottom of his heart. The suspicious girl singing at night in an uninhabited park cannot be compared with his questionable self that was staring at her with an ecstatic expression.

Furthermore, the relation between both their locations was very risky. That angle, almost like looking up from right under…it was clearly perverted.

I must say something… from the mouth of the impatient boy, some very ordinary and regarding this situation, unsuitable words came out:

"Ah, err…good evening."

What the hell am I saying!!!

Ren rebutted himself loudly in his heart. But instead of screaming, the trusting girl returned the greeting with a smile.

"Good evening. It's a lovely night, isn't it?"

"…huh? Ah, yes, that's right."

"Could you please step aside just a little?"

"…ugh, I'm – I'm sorry!"

With a bright red face, Ren jumped aside with force as if he was struck by a car. Watching that excessive response, the girl tilted her head on the side appearing curious and without hesitation jumped from the jungle-gym.

"Ah…"

Although the playground equipment was intended for children, from the top of it to the ground there are more than two meters. The landing's impact was supposed to be considerable but without bending her knees, the girl got down lightly and easily. As though the ground gently caught her.

"What's the matter?"

"Ah, no, that is …"

In front of the smiling girl, Ren mumbles. He doesn't understand why but he is frozen solid. When

looking at the girl's face his mind becomes blank and he can think of nothing else.

On the other side, the girl doesn't pay attention to Ren's strangeness, looking up to the sky.

"The night sky is really fair… I didn't know the moon could be so large…"

Fair…?

Ren looked up in doubt. Even if it was clear, this is Tokyo's sky after all. With countless stars showing, the sky cut up by inelegant skyscrapers was narrow at best. The girl gazed innocently at that sky. Escaping the gravity's binding she is longing to reach that place. But at the same time, it seem she understands that such a thing can never come true.

So beautiful…

For a second time, from Ren's consciousness everything except the girl disappeared. He wanted wings – he strongly thought so. If he could fly into the sky, he would take her beyond the stars.

"Hey." Abruptly she shifted her attention to Ren.

"W-what?" To a Ren responding while being perplexed, she extended her hand quite naturally.

"Let's play."

That penetrating expression that sensed even God, present when looking at the sky, already disappeared. The one standing in front of his eyes was a charming but ordinary girl. She seemed to be approximately the same age as Ren. When he saw he was a bit taller, Ren faintly felt relief.

"…"

Being too fascinated by her, he forgot to answer. Taking that for a refusal she made a completely lonely face.

"…no?"

"No no. Of course not, let's play."

"Hooray!"

Showing a smile that bloomed openly on her whole face, the girl seized Ren's arms with both her hands. Feeling the warm hands, Ren turned red up to his ears.

…warm?

Ren suddenly felt the problem. In this cold weather she wore a thin dress…

"It's not good being so lightly dressed in this weather. You'll catch a cold!"

Rushing, he took his own coat and put it on the girl.

"I'm fine."

"No! Wear it."

Unusually forceful, Ren passed her arm through the sleeve of the coat. After buttoning it precisely with his own hands, he let out a long, relieved breath.

"Now it's good."

"…"

With a bewildered appearance she stared fixedly at the coat forced on her. But, it didn't seem she felt annoyed, moving her small body, checking the feel of the coat. Expressing a gentle and soft smile, she hugged her own body.

"So warm…"

"…ah"

When the girl smiled so happily, Ren felt a crash as if his head was hit. Just by thinking that smile was intended for him was enough to envelop him in a feeling of bliss that made him dizzy. Wanting to greet her, Ren realized he forgot a very important thing.

"S-say…"

"Eh?"

"Can I ask for your name?"

"…"

Just like that her expression clouded. Assaulted by an unbelievable feeling of guilt, panicking, Ren took his question back.

"Ah, actually it's fine if you don't want to, but…"

The girl shook her head in silence and murmured, sighing:

"…Ayumi."

"Oh, it's Ayumi-chan? How do you write it?"

"With hiragana."

Her voice sank even deeper. The impatient Ren, trying to somehow enliven the situation, with a deliberate cheerful voice told her his name.

"Eh, my name is Ren. The Ren from Purgatory. Do you know it?"

"Yes, it's a very cool name," Ayumi nodded, slightly recovering her smile.

With just that, Ren foolishly lost his head, blushing.

"A-ha-ha – somehow I have a feeling I don't live up to my name."

"That's not true. It suits you."

"Is that so?"

"Of course."

Forgetting the awkwardness from just before, both their smiles harmoniously met.

"Let me see, let's play. What do you want to play with?"

"The swings!"

Without wavering, Ayumi immediately replied at Ren's question, pulling himself together.

"I tried it just a little bit but I couldn't swing very well. As I thought, it has no meaning, only knowing the way to do it."

"Then I'll push you."

While bewildered by her queer expression, Ren proposed that. But –

"That's useless! I want to do it by myself!" Ayumi obstinately insisted.

Appearing full of surprising independence, she sat on the swing and started to push awkwardly by herself.

"That's not good."

Because the rhythm was completely off, the swing's movement was instantly stopped. From the

swing next to her, he showed a sample and lectured her carefully about the way of swinging.

"Like that, and now kick your legs."

Appearing a quick learner, Ayumi instantly grasped the skill. The swing's movement gradually became smooth and the swinging much larger. Ren judged there is no more need to show her the way and began swinging standing up. He hadn't rode in swings for the last four, five years and swinging after a long time was pretty pleasant.

Wanting to show off to the girl next to him, his feelings also a part of it, Ren kicked out the swing inserting much more power.

"…"

Staring at Ren's posing back, Ayumi, bearing an antagonistic feeling, boldly challenged him by swinging standing.

"Eh, wait…"

When Ren tried to restrain her, the focused Ayumi didn't notice. Uncertainly getting up on the board she sat down on until now, she swung by imitating what she saw. Becoming the victim of the height of her own

learning ability, the swing Ayumi rode, instantly began inclining at an angle dangerous for a beginner.

"Ayumi-chan! Stop!" Ren cried in a big voice. But one pace too late.

Ayumi's hand slipped and with force, as if shot from a catapult, was thrown diagonally into the upper air.

"Kyaa –"

" – uh."

Faster than thinking, Ren's body moved. Kicking the swing's board with all his strength, he jumps at an angle close to horizontal. He seized Ayumi in the air just before she crashed into the ground. Without change, making sure that he embraced that small body, he landed on his back. Although he rolled on the ground to disperse the shock, because wanting to protect Ayumi was more important, he practically didn't make any defense.

Although his back and head hit the ground bitterly, Ren held onto his consciousness with his fighting spirit and willpower. After finally rolling on the ground for five times, Ren finally set free the shock of the fall. Ignoring the many stars twinkling in his field

of vision, before everything else he confirmed Ayumi's condition.

"Are you all right?"

"Ah, yes…"

Because he covered her very skillfully Ayumi didn't feel any pain, not to mention injuries. In her pupils opened blankly, nothing but surprise at facing an unexpected situation floated.

"I'm glad…"

Confirming Ayumi's safety Ren stretched out on the ground exhausted. The crash caused by the fall thoroughly hurt his body, but because he didn't budge, the feeling of being able to protect her well satisfied him.

"Ren? Does it hurt?"

Seeing Ayumi looking at him with unease, Ren shook his head laughing.

"I'm fine. But…" he continued including a slight rebuke in his tone:

"Because swinging standing can be dangerous, please stop it."

"…Yes."

Although nodding meekly, she immediately smiled pulling Ren's sleeve.

"Hey, hey, next I want to ride that."

She pointed at a simply made seesaw. Without being discouraged by the splendid blunder, staring with a bitter smile at the girl itching to play, Ren stood up and led her by the hand.

"Yes, yes. As the young lady commands."

Joining hands cordially both of them ran up to the seesaw. Forgetting about the passing time they continued playing together. They rode in the seesaw, glided in the slide, played with sand in the sand-pit. Although it was clear Ayumi had burning aspirations of "completing" all the park's playground equipment, Ren stubbornly didn't gave permission for the horizontal bar. A beginner with a skirt shouldn't be allowed to pull herself onto the bar.

Part 3

And now –

"Huh, …it was fun."

Sitting down on an ornamental animal with no purpose, Ayumi shows a blissful smile.

"This is the first time I played like this!"

"If you're fine with me I can keep you company whenever you want."

As nonchalant as possible but in fact including a once in a lifetime courage, Ren proposed like this. But in the act of it, Ayumi's face clouded.

"Ah…yeah…thanks, but…"

"But?"

It happened when Ren was asking back.

"Eh?"

With a loud skid sound, a black station wagon came to the entrance of the park. The door opened before the car fully stopped and of course, men in black, rushed into the playground.

"W-what is…uaa!?"

Thrusting away a dumbfounded Ren, the black suits rushed to Ayumi.

"…"

Ayumi stared at them in silence. It does not mean she wasn't able to react to the sudden situation. After understanding their true colors and their objective, she calmly received their actions.

"Ayumi-chan!"

In front of the shouting Ren, the black suits's hands seized Ayumi. Without changing the force of the rush, they dragged and knocked down the girl with no mercy.

"…kuu."

Because two people roughly applied torsion on her arms, Ayumi let out a small cry of pain. But even so, the black suits didn't slow down.

"We captured the target. Yes. We'll transport it immediately."

A cold voice. Turning around, the man seeming to be the leader of the troupe, reported Ayumi's capture holding his telephone in one hand. Thoroughly disregarding Ren's existence, the leader jerked his jaw at the man who sized Ayumi.

"Do it"

The man on his left took out a rectangular something from his breast pocket. Pushing a switch, sparks scattered at its tip. After several people seized a non-resistant girl, will they go as far as using a stun gun, changing into total incompetents? Even using such a method that surpasses cruelty, in regard for the black suits' performance, there was no hesitation there. With a movement with no uncertainty, the stun gun was pressed to her back. And then…

While the black suits restrained each of Ayumi's arms, Ren made his appearance with the speed of a thunderclap. Leaving an after print he pushed up his knee smashing most of the jaw and teeth belonging to the man trying to use the stun gun. Pushing up his right foot, Ren launched his left foot even more. Changing his body's twist in a turning motion he spun using his right foot as an axis.

The back roundhouse kick's unmatched accuracy shot the lights out of the man seizing Ayumi's right hand. His head shaken with enough force to break his backbone, the man swooned silently.

"R…Ren?"

Returning a nod to Ayumi, staring at him in wonder, he stood in a position where he could protect Ayumi.

"Kid…who are you?"

Ignoring the black suits trying to overpower him, he pulled out a mobile phone from his breast pocket. Without hesitation he pressed down the buttons: one zero zero.

"Hello, this is the police. Do you have an emergency?"

From the high volume speaker a business like voice came through. The black suits caught their breath in silence.

"Hello? Hello!? What happened? Are you all right?" sensing an incident in the telephone's silence the operator spoke with a serious tone.

"Well then…what are you going to do?"

At Ren's question or maybe provocation, the leader took action. Inserting his hand in his breast pocket he took something out. The object that came out as a result of such spontaneous, breathing-like action was a boorish, black handgun. Aiming the gun point at a dumbfounded Ren, he pulled the gunlock without de-

lay. The gunshot resounded over the silencer. The bullet shot at subsonic speed smashed the telephone.

"…ku!?" Ren muttered at the impact knocking his right arm with all his strength.

Does he usually just shoot?

As one would expect such a direct response was strange. At the cruelty of shooting at children without hesitation, Ren was horrified. The man kept the gun up, pointing it towards Ren's forehead. The flagrant murder intent made him feel an imaginary pain on his forehead.

"You're an impressive kid," the man murmured in admiration.

"Very skillful for your age. Your sharp reaction is also excellent. But we didn't come here to play. We can't just report we were repelled by a child so we're running back home!"

"Ren! Please run away! These men are serious"

"Ah, yeah – it looks that way."

Responding to Ayumi's scream-like manner of speaking Ren gave her a small nod.

"Mercilessly shooting at women and children, huh? If that's the case, going easy on you does not seem necessary."

"Bullshit!" sneered the man, hearing Ren's words.

"Stop your hero pretension, if possible. In reality it doesn't go as smoothly as in the movies."

"That's true. Still, in this world there is a **reality** that exceeds any movie. *That*, is what I'll teach you."

Responding to Ren's will the fire spirits raised their voice in joy. The golden flame, blowing up, pushing away the darkness – being able to recognize that radiance eyes alone cannot capture, among the black suits there wasn't even one.

"R-Ren…?"

Roughly at the same time Ayumi muttered his name, the fire spirits changed their embodiment. Without previous notice, the manifested blaze burned the point end of the man's gun.

"What…"

The special steel of the gun's barrel helplessly melted. The silencer installed at the pointed end fell to the ground with a dull sound.

"Y-you – "

Receiving the man's hair-raising glance, Ren informed him in a low voice:

"It would have been better to melt somewhat closer to the center."

What would have happened if the flame that melted the special steel heated the gun powder, there is no longer any need to explain it.

"I'm not particularly well acquainted with weapons but what would have happened to the hand holding that particular spontaneously discharged gun, huh? Only the hand would be blown off? Or…would the head blow up as well, I wonder?"

"E-Enjutsushi…" among the black suits only one whispered so, with a hollow voice.

"My name is Kannagi Ren. If you know the meaning of that name, quickly withdraw. Otherwise – I won't show any mercy."

"K-Kannagi…"

The black suits' voices were already close to screams.

Kannagi – among the flame manipulating Enjutsushi they are known as the strongest clan. All professional mercenaries have a common knowledge about

that name. As the one existence you unconditionally must not oppose.

It is of course, only natural.

For beings that can turn humans to ash just by thinking of it, one would be hesitant to put them in the same category as humans. Being hostile to them meant a waste of time and a loss of life. Moreover, the power yielded by a direct descendant, someone who calls oneself by Kannagi's name is in a different dimension – they were told they have by far surpassed the human level. The opponent wasn't someone you could cross swords with, with only several armed men. The black suits prepared to flee at once.

They obviously stepped back. If the withdrawal sign comes down, they would leave the scene as fast as possible.

But among them, just one – the party's leader didn't lose his presence of mind. Casually throwing away the melted gun barrel, he faced Ren with a bold smile.

"By no means did I imagine I will have the honor to meet the young Kannagi prince in such a place. If

that's the case, the etiquette dictates we should also name ourselves" said the man proudly, in one beat.

"We are protégé of the Tsuwabuki. My name is Kayano. I serve as the leader of this force."

"…Tch!"

Now it was Ren's turn to be disturbed. The Tsuwabuki household, that is, a family of Chijutsushi, manipulating the spirits of the earth. If Kannagi are the strongest Enjutsushi, Tsuwabuki are the strongest Chijutsushi. Their influence is not inferior to the Kannagi clan.

"It appears to be some sort of misunderstanding but *that* thing originally belongs to the Tsuwabuki household. If Kannagi's eldest son would steal *it*, the consequence of such a foolish act I cannot imagine."

"Kuu…"

Because he named himself Kannagi, Ren is no longer able to settle this business privately. Regardless of its authenticity, this would be played as if the Kannagi clan committed hostile acts towards the Tsuwabuki household.

What am I supposed to do…?

Although this was just a conversational exchange so far, for Ren the last ten minutes became a mental burden. His original character being gentle and weak to pressure, he is a boy with an unsuitable disposition to argue with others. However, obediently handing Ayumi over was out of the question. From the black suits' entrance until now, that option was never considered in his mind.

"That"…? "thing" you said? …don't screw around!

Ren was angry. Deeply. Quietly.

Among the Kannagi clan's natural color, the elitism, the idea of being part of a chosen people, he is one of those few exceptions maintaining a normal, healthy spirit. The arrogant ideology of confusing one's abilities merits with the merits of the human nature, he doesn't have it.

The person possessing a stronger ability than humans cannot help but judge oneself more strictly. His father's, Genma's teachings, certainly came to fruition inside Ren.

Therefore, as far as he is concerned, a person regarding others as objects, there is no use in arguing about it, he recognizes it as the lowest of trash. It was

unthinkable of handing Ayumi over to those kind of people.

Think…if this would be my big brother, at this time…

The reason that Ren, who hated conflict, was able to banter easily with the black suits was because he kept in mind, 'What would Kazuma do?' and based his actions off that.

The provocative speech and conduct that taunts people, the precise timing for striking the opponent's weak spot, it went smoothly so far, but because he took unsuitable actions for his disposition, he's under a lot of stress. But…

I'm almost there. I'll pull it through…

Ren instinctively sensed this is the critical moment. If he can get through this, the enemy will step aside.

The perfect imitation of Kazuma – wholesale slaughter to avoid future trouble – if he could do that, it is the very best policy to make them withdraw without being hurt. With relaxed shoulders, he faced the black suits with an innocent smile.

"If it's like that, it can't be helped."

"I'm happy you understand," Kayano replied superficially polite but rude in intent.

Sending a sign to his subordinates, he tried to continue Ayumi's capture.

"Aaargh!?"

"Fireeeee!"

But the black suits instantly stopped their movements. Because the moment they started walking a golden flame appeared before their eyes.

"…What is this behavior? I thought we reached an agreement?" Kayano asked, with an expression more polite than necessary. Of course, it was but an attempt to intimidate.

"That's right, we reached an agreement. That is, there is no room for negotiation."

"…Do you really understand? Our role as the Tsuwabuki household representatives – "

"There is no need to repeat it. My hearing is not particularly poor," Ren coldly interrupted Kayano's words. In account of making double sure, he called out the flames.

At the dozens of golden will'-o'-the-wisp shining in the dead of the night, the black suits raised voices, trembling with fear.

"Well, now that the self-introductions are out of the way, we should start using force anytime now, right?"

The person standing there was by no means just a twelve year old boy. The golden radiance basking that body in light was the fire of a demon, clearly laughing. Only armed humans had no means of resistance.

"Th-this is not the end."

"You people have two options,"

Completely disregarding the man's words Ren announced.

"You will disappear from my face with your own legs or I will annihilate you. You have three seconds. Choose whatever you like."

"Damn."

After two seconds of indecision, the leader almost spit out the order:

"Return to the base."

Of course nobody objected to that.

"…Sigh"

Seeing off the car leaving in a hurry, Ren finally relaxed his body. Turning around he confirmed Ayumi's situation:

"Ayumi-chan are you all right?"

"Ah, yes…" Still somewhat dumbfounded, Ayumi nodded vaguely.

"You are part of Kannagi…"

"Surprised?"

"Yes, very"

Closing her eyes partly, intoxicated, almost entranced she was staring at the flames.

"The golden, purification flame – how beautiful…"

"…"

Ayumi's face gazing at the flames, Ren was silently watching it in fascination. The way in which the golden flames shined in her large, black pupils was beautiful to the extent he involuntarily forgot how to breathe.

The first to calm down was Ayumi. Standing up while brushing the dirt off her clothes, she bowed very deeply to Ren.

"Thank you, you helped me – but was that all right?"

"Well, I hope so…"

Although his face became somewhat stiff, Ren showed a smile to give her peace of mind.

"If I can't help a troubled girl, there is no meaning in having this power."

"…Thank you."

Again speaking words of gratitude, Ayumi smiled softly. Just by looking at that smiling face Ren had a feeling that all the troubles so far and all the troubles that would come after this have been compensated for.

"And so…errr…"

Apologetically looking up at Ren, who was full of happiness, Ayumi boldly spoke:

"Maybe you will think I am shameless but…can I request of you just one more thing…?"

Apologetic but at the same time including seriousness in her wish the girl looked hard at Ren. To be able to refuse that gaze, it was impossible for him.

Part 4

"You still haven't found *that*, Yuuji?"

Tsuwabuki Mayumi lost her temper at the man kneeling in front of her. The man – Yuuji lowered his head even more, letting the tyrant's anger go past.

"Until now, that thing has not once put up resistance! What the heck is Kayano doing, unable to catch it?"

"I'm very sorry, my lady. It seems that thing made a Kannagi practitioner ally – "

"Kannagi? Why are the Kannagi intruding on us?"

"No, it doesn't seem the family consensus. The practitioner was involved by chance, without knowing its circumstance." While Mayumi folded her arms in irritation, she listened carefully to Yuuji's report.

"Kannagi Ren? Although a child, he's not the head of the family. He was properly seduced by that thing, huh?"

"That only speaks of my lady's beauty."

Yuuji's words, intended to emulate, helped only to bring Mayumi's wrath upon him.

"Don't put me together with that thing!"

"P-Pardon me, it was inexcusable!"

Flattening under the abuse thrown at him, Yuuji deeply prostrated himself before her. The man, in the middle of his twenties deprecated in front of a girl, who was heads shorter. Maybe funny, also unsightly but the man himself was extremely serious.

Mayumi ordered in a rough tone:

"Try putting me in the same class as that thing, one more time! I will never ever exchange words with you again!"

"P-Please, permit me at least that much!"

While rubbing his forehead against the tatami mat, Yuuji begged for forgiveness in an exaggerated tone.

"I will, without fail capture that thing myself! Therefore please, please – "

"…"

Mayumi placed her foot oh Yuuji's head. She mercilessly pressed her body weight against it.

"I wonder if you really understand. If we lose that thing, I will…"

"I won't allow it!"

While his head was trampled down by Mayumi, Yuuji strongly pledged.

"I – I will protect my lady! I swear I won't let anything hurt you."

"…humph?"

Bestowing upon Yuuji the same smile she would have given to a faithful dog, Mayumi removed her foot from his head.

"However imposing your determination, can you win? Although young, your opponent is a direct descendant of Kannagi – the top ranking Enjutsushi, you know?"

Yuuji quietly raised his face. Those eyes, looking up at his master, carrying an absolute self-confidence, replied to that.

"To those conceited fools thinking Enjutsushi are the strongest, let's instruct them about reality."

"Live up to my expectations."

Lightly bowing her head, Mayumi's wavy black hair softly flickered.

" – Fuun"

Approximately at the same time Juugo hung up the receiver, from the other side of the sliding door Ayano's voice got through.

"Father?"

"Enter."

Without introduction, Juugo asked his daughter upon entering the room:

"Did Ren return home?"

"Not yet," Ayano immediately replied.

"Even though it's already past nine o'clock; I wonder what is he doing? Aunt Miyuki is worried. She said his phone is turned off and she can't call him."

"…I see"

"But I can't understand aunt Miyuki. When Kazuma left home, she didn't show any sign of being worried."

"…well, it's because Ren is still very young."

Vaguely dodging the question, Juugo returned to the real issue at hand.

"I was contacted by the Tsuwabuki, you know."

"Tsuwabuki, you say? Those Chijutsushi?"

With a grave nod, he informed her point blank of the shocking truth.

"It seems Ren plundered the Tsuwabuki household's treasure and escaped."

"Ha!? What is this!?"

"I don't know the details but the other party says so."

"…"

After a few seconds of silence, Ayano slowly opened her mouth:

"…were the Tsuwabuki deceived or are the Tsuwabuki trying to deceive us – that ascertainment is essential."

"We have too little information. It's too early for a judgment."

Although his response was reserved, Juugo didn't reject Ayano's thoughts. For both of them, who knew Ren's character very well, the report received from the Tsuwabuki didn't appear to have any value, only nonsense.

For all that, in a certain way, the truth was just like that.

"So, what about those guys? They told you to take responsibility and that we should search for him too?"

"No, it seems they didn't want us to get involved. Worst case, if Ren gets killed, we should consent to it, or so I was told." Upon hearing those remarks serving their own convenience, Ayano raised her eyebrows.

"What is that? Don't tell me you accepted this?"

"Don't be absurd!" Juugo promptly denied.

"Because I didn't understand the circumstance with that alone, when I pressed them for a more detailed explanation they became evasive and cut the conversation."

"What the heck is that!?"

Toward the exceedingly rude behavior, Ayano too revealed her anger.

"Generally, they were always a meaninglessly self-important bunch. Because they shoulder the protection of Mt. Fuji, I can't believe they have the nerve to imagine themselves more excellent than other people."

Mt. Fuji, by nature is an active volcano that didn't erupt in the last three hundred years, being suppressed by the Tsuwabuki household. If the steamy mountain would have erupted – the capital and consequently Japan's political and economic loss would have been extensive.

If you think about it this way, the achievements of the Tsuwabuki family are great.

However, using that as a foundation for looking down on people, the attitude with which they demand respect and admiration, Ayano cannot help but be irritated by it.

The power of the spirit technique users is only lent to them by the spirits. Thus, the spirits are assisting, expecting the practitioners to work in cooperation and the people granted a greater power, it's only natural they must shoulder bigger responsibilities.

"One by one they became condescending of that fact – they completely fell out of rhythm."

"Well, the fact that their mission is significant is the truth."

"Something like that. At least significant enough to sacrifice a member of their own family each and every time," Ayano declared bitterly from the bottom of her heart.

"In what way can you boast about offering human sacrifices for three hundred years? They had no intention of becoming a pagan group?"

"It's because there was no other way."

"Even so…" That prompt objection, Ayano kept it back with a tedious expression. Right now, that's not what we ought to discuss.

"Anyway, it's absolutely necessary to find Ren before those Tsuwabuki get to him. Did you get in touch with Kazuma?"

About the object being sought, there aren't many superior Enjutsushi. To say nothing of the situation, Kazuma will unconditionally find Ren faster than the Tsuwabuki. Ayano had confidence in that fact.

"I can't get in touch with him," Juugo's answer was ruthless.

"He doesn't answer his phone, he doesn't seem to be home. I have people searching for them as we speak."

With a meaningful gaze, Juugo fleetingly looked at Ayano.

"You worked together with Kazuma today. Do you know where he went afterwards?"

"No, I, don't"

With a rusty tone, as if steel frames rubbed together, Ayano let out the answer, inserting power in each and every word.

Although faltering underneath that strange intensity, Juugo asked again:

"Ugh…are you sure?"

"The moment work ended we separated immediately. That is correct, without delay."

"…is that so?"

The strength of her tone, not permitting any objection, made Juugo give up on the investigation. Putting the Kazuma issue aside, he promotes the conversation.

"If it's like that, I have to request a search from the Special Data Arrangement."

"From that woman?"

Seeing Ayano arching her eyebrows in dissatisfaction, Juugo was surprised.

"You don't like Police Superintendent Tachibana? I thought such an independent woman would have gained your good will."

"…Well…I think she is splendid in that respect," Ayano said with a bitter voice.

Tachibana Kirika. Leading the only public domestic demon repelling organization – the Special Data Arrangement belonging to the Metropolitan Police

Department, a woman recognized by everyone as very capable.

Without flattery, Ayano thought it was a big deal. But, their first meeting was the worst.

Of all things, that woman, intimately linking her arm with Kazuma's appeared from a love hotel (actually from the love hotel district).

From that moment, for Ayano, Kirika became the foe that cannot be allowed to live under the same canopy of heaven. She doesn't really understand why, but anyway she dislikes that woman. Kirika's figure, overfamiliarly, coquettishly leaning against Kazuma and each time she thinks of Kazuma's stretched upper lip, she is furiously angry.

Why that is she doesn't know but she can't help but feel irritated.

"Nevertheless, just because you dislike her, don't cut the connection with the Reference Room."

"I know that."

In reply to Juugo's pointing out, Ayano puffed her cheeks.

After the collapse of the Fuuga-Shu the Kannagi clan's information network remained pretty much de-

stroyed. Therefore Juugo had his eye on replacing the Fuuga-Shu with Metropolitan Police Department's Special Data Arrangement.

The S.D.A had almost no practitioners with combat abilities but in exchange has a substantial sightseer system. Moreover, if you include the investigation ability of the normal police, their intelligence gathering faculty is without mistake the largest in Japan.

"I don't mix personal feelings with work. Have you already made the request?"

"Uh. Make your preparations. You leave the moment you receive the information."

"Understood."

"Ah, and then – "

To Ayano, leaving the room, Juugo added a secondary task.

"If it's possible, get in touch with Kazuma."

"…Don't ask for the impossible, Father."

Turning her head around Ayano showed her father an amazed expression.

"If it's impossible for father, it's also for me. Did you forget? His phone number I got from you, Father, not him."

"That may be true, but…how many times have you worked together with Kazuma? Haven't you decided on some manner of contact during emergencies?"

"No."

Hearing that plain declaration, Juugo was visibly disappointed.

"…Is that so?"

Pretending not to see her father's drooped shoulders, Ayano left the room. Closing the sliding door from behind, she said in a sulky voice:

"…I don't get him, that guy."

The vanishing whisper reached nobody's ears.

Chapter 2: Small Client

Part 1

Let's go a few hours back in time.

"Seeii!"

With a sharp exclamation, Ayano swung Enraiha down. The divine sword granted by the king of the flame spirits to conquer the devil, burned and exorcized in a single stroke the revengeful ghost haunting the construction site.

"…Fuuu"

Confirming the ghost's annihilation, Ayano restored Enraiha back to its scabbard – her own body. Immediately from behind, a vapid sound can be heard:

Bu, bu, bu

"…!"

Looking over the shoulder at the sad sight, sproing, she faced the source of the noise with a villainous discernment. That gaze, with no exaggeration, contains several times more killing intent than when facing the vengeful ghost.

Basking in those murderous eyes, Kazuma finally stopped the act – clapping hands – giving such a dull sound. But as evidence he wasn't particularly sorry, his predatory smile didn't disappear.

"…"

With a challenging look that could kill people by sight, Ayano stared at Kazuma very long. The usually sloppy facial expression. A slack attitude from which you couldn't feel a trace of tension. That was acceptable. Even if he appears relaxed, it's impossible for this man to be less than prepared before a battle.

But even so, around his head, or to be more accurate, from around his jaw and below, there was a thing, as one would expect, she cannot stomach. The width of Kazuma's body increased by 20%. He did not get fat, much less put on muscle. He was bundling up in layers of clothes.

At the topmost he was wearing a fluffy down jacket. Stuffed with lots and lots of feathers. He seemed to be extremely warm. Also, how many extra clothes is he wearing underneath to appear to have doubled the thickness of his arms? Furthermore, a scarf is rolled

around his head; he wears gloves – the origin of those dull applause.

No matter how you look at it, it's a flawless winter-sports-watching-look.

If he were to hold a warmed canned coffee in his hand, before killing the vengeful ghost, Ayano would have tried to decapitate Kazuma first.

Ayano focused that thorny glance on Kazuma. The reason he was standing in this place was because he was supposed to act as Ayano's guard. To conclude, it wasn't to watch other people's fight from a safe place, with an appearance that would slow down his movement.

Despite it, this man is –

"Just by standing there distractedly, to be given money, what a good social position, huh?"

Sarcasm with all her might. But naturally, that degree of scorn doesn't get through Kazuma's thick skin.

"I agree. The suzerain favors me so!"

Toward Kazuma's frivolous, sneering response, Ayano felt a fairly serious killing intent. She shouted, letting anger take it's natural course.

"I'm sick of it! Why does Father hire you for this kind of job!?"

"Don't ask me that"

Certainly, so far, Juugo never allowed Ayano to take a job unassisted. But, the duty of being an escort held so far by the practitioners of the branch families nowadays was entrusted to Kazuma alone.

Of course, he was being paid.

No matter how nasty his personality was, Kazuma is a top class practitioner. His remuneration is by no means inexpensive. In spite of this, Juugo, even on these trifling ghost extermination jobs, obstinately continues to employ Kazuma. On jobs like these, Kazuma literally doesn't lift a finger. Ayano does all the work by herself. This man stands before her eyes for the sake of profit.

You're just a pimp!

Irritating but inevitable, Ayano decided to allow herself a modest recreation. Staring at that hateful, frivolously laughing man, she says in a tone that allows no objection:

"I'm hungry. We're going to dinner."

Kazuma scowled slightly.

"Do you want to extort money from me again?"

"Why are you complaining? They're easy money at best"

"That's different. If I were to name it, my job is like insurance. There is no need to move until an opponent you cannot manage alone appears."

In reply to Kazuma's solemn exposition, Ayano sternly trusted her finger in front of him.

"In case of insurance, isn't there supposed to be a refund?"

"If he were to refund every time, the insurance man would immediately go bankrupt."

"You're safe. Because you still make a lot of profit."

Obstinately, Ayano strongly insisted. Even Kazuma became generous after securing such a comfortable job and wasn't in the mood to unconditionally refuse her. Even his rebuttal lost their usual severity, containing sweetness similar in some respects to a pre-established harmony.

"Well, fine. If it's just food."

In the end Kazuma gave in. Ayano stiffened her mouth already turning into a broad smile, proudly nodding.

"Very well. Let's go then. Yukari told me about a delicious French restaurant."

"…French, huh?"

Kazuma calmly drew Ayano's attention, who already started walking.

"Whether it's French of ethnic it doesn't matter but will they let us in, dressed like this?"

Ayano turned around, twitching her eyebrows. Her attire was the usual school uniform. Because this suit is an important ceremonial dress, it said everything is OK, a mighty item.

But Kazuma –



"Why don't you dress properly?"

"Fool."

With a single word Kazuma cut down and threw away Ayano's criticism.

"Why do I have to dress up in the exorcism business?"

"That wouldn't be too bad. Perhaps you will become better looking."

"Leave me alone. It can't be helped if my partner is not worthy enough to dress up for, right?"

It goes without saying but those words can't help but incur Ayano's displeasure. Arching her eyebrows in anger she commands:

"Do you hear me? From now on, during the job wear a necktie. Do you understand?"

"I refuse," Kazuma answered instantly.

That quick reaction clearly denoted that there is no place for negotiation.

"What a cheapskate!"

"Do you think that's where the problem is?"

During this vigorous match full of boos and irony the couple walked to the station. Although the ambiance was stormy, those two's back and forth argu-

ment, not wanting to be separated, snuggling as close as they like, looked like nothing else but some sort of matrimonial quarrel – maybe.

Eventually both were admitted in, even without neckties, settling down after searching for the most expensive (this is essential) restaurant.

"Well, something like this."

"Don't <<something like this>> me! You always order the most expensive thing on the menu! Do you bear some grudge against me?"

Ayano bent her head slightly to one side and gazed at Kazuma with a completely curious look.

" – Eh, you thought I didn't?"

Being treated by Kazuma to dinner, as a matter of fact, this is not the first time. Or perhaps I should say, it already became an after work custom.

Harassment for the sake of diminishing, even if just a little, Kazuma's profits obtained without working at all. Ayano explained her actions like this and she herself truly believed so – at the very least, at a superficial level.

"Before I met you I didn't know."

Hands joined before her chest, like a dreaming maiden, Ayano whispered with a voice shaking with delight:

"The meal other people treat me to could be so delicious."

Ecstatically and with eyes closed, she is looking forward to Kazuma's reaction. However, the severe retort she certainly believed would come, no matter how much time passes, doesn't appear. She opens her eyes, looking at Kazuma. The man sitting in front of her turned an absentminded gaze outside the window.

He didn't hear a word from Ayano's provocation.

"What are you looking at?"

"Hmmm? Ah…"

Brought back by Ayano's voice Kazuma's eyes barely return to her.

"Nothing"

"…hmm"

"Sorry to keep you waiting" For a short while the same quarrel-like unromantic conversation continued. The waiter appeared carrying champagne.

"…ufuu ◎"

Ayano attentively watched the champagne poured into her glass, making satisfied sounds, with a smile on her face. She took the glass in one hand.

"Well then, let's celebrate another job successfully finished - "

The moment she put up her glass for the toast, Kazuma abruptly stood up.

"Kazuma?"

"I'm sorry but I have urgent business. I'll take care of the bill, so don't worry."

With those words, without looking at Ayano, he took the receipt and walked away.

"Eh…wait…"

Ayano stared in a daze at Kazuma, paying by the register. And just like that, without any sort of greeting, Kazuma left the store and disappeared in the middle of the crowd.

"What's the matter with you…"

At that time Ayano finally calmed down. The simmering anger made her body tremble.

"What are you trying to say…!"

Because this was a public place she barely managed to keep her voice down. In that state, that violent

emotion that filled her insides was demanding an outlet to get angry at.

The slender fingertips supporting the legs of the champagne glass broke it with a sinister sound.

Part 2

After leaving the restaurant, with a manner of walking that showed no hesitation, Kazuma had his eyes upon the back street. After walking several minutes, finding a slightly empty space and stopping there, he looked up at the sky.

"Well then - what are you going to do?"

Facing the empty space, quietly, Kazuma asked -

"Will you come out by yourself? Or else - be dragged out?"

The answer was a blow. The light ball that suddenly appeared came flying at high speed, aiming at Kazuma's head.

That oblique attack from the sky, Kazuma dodged it, nimbly swaying back. The light ball flying before his eyes suddenly altered its angle and started climbing just before it crashed into the ground.

A second dive.

But this time, with no dodging involved, its aim was off.

"Good grief!"

The light ball flies around Kazuma as it pleases. The irregular high speed maneuver disregarding the laws of inertia, perfectly exceeds humans' perception capacity.

By using his eyes alone, Kazuma can only perceive the light ball's movement as a line not a point.

But -

Lightly, his right hand stretched horizontally. As it, just by doing that he can take something which has been placed there, a relaxed, natural movement.

And yet, when the light track blended with his fingertips, as if it was something they mutually agreed upon - Kazuma's hand seized the light ball. And without change grasped it tightly.

"It huts, it hurts, it huuuuuurts!!"

The high pitch shrill that gushed out of the light ball jolted his brain.

Simultaneously the light faded and the real figure hidden inside materialized. It had a human pattern. However, it's height was less than twenty centimeters. Incidentally, the ears were slightly sharp and transparent wings were growing from its back.

Looking hard at the thing held in his hand, Kazuma murmured, looking bored.

"What, it was a bug?"

"Wrong! Bug is wrong!!"

From inside Kazuma's palm, that thing was wiggling and struggling.

It was belonging to the species referred to as pixies. Living inside forests, mischievous but cute fairies. They rarely ventured into human communities but as he unfortunately knew, not never.

It happened at the end of the last year. Together with Ayano, during the job at the school she was attending, it was the first time he was around something called "a fairy's prank".

Although he was the only whose good fortune wasn't damaged, the memory of that one night's stupid fooling around was still fresh.

"So, what do you want?" asked Kazuma with apathetic words.

If the pixie were to say this is just "a greeting because of a chance meeting" he was seriously determined to crush it.

"You see, you see, I have a request, Contractor-sama."

Unfortunately, it doesn't seem this fairy just happened to pass by. However, the response was meaningful. Because he was called by a name it wasn't supposed to know.

"Does this mean that instead of greeting the party you want to ask a favor from, you start the attack?"

Cross-examined, visibly looked down upon, while innocently laughing, the fairy answered.

"Ah, that - that was a play for the sake of an impressive stage-entry? Something like that - ouuuuch!?"

"Ha - ha - ha"

With a dry laughter, Kazuma grasps the fairy, considerably inserting more force. He said with perfectly serious tone:

"Die at once!"

"Auuuu…it huuurts, I'm really going to die!"

With sober eyes. Kazuma looked at the struggling fairy. - Of course, without reducing the strength.

Observing the way the fairy's movements were becoming slughish, when it's breath became faint, he opened his palm. With no energy to flap it's wings, the

fairy fell to the ground with a flop. After several seconds -

"Auuuuu…how cruel…Gyaaaa!"

Kazuma lightly placed his foot above the fairy who got up at last.

While feeling a frail resistance from the sole of his foot, he fired the next question.

"Well then, question number two. Where did you find out about me?"

"Aah, how terrible!"

Just like that, the energetic fairy jumped out from underneath the foot. Standing still in front of Kazuma's eyes, glaring at him as if saying "I'm really angry!"

"You don't remember about me?"

"You don't get it."

Waiving his hand quite bothered, flinging off the fairy's complaints and its body, Kazuma asked:

"What did you call me?"

Surely the pixie saw his face during that incident but he doesn't remember telling it he was a Contractor. It wasn't information easy to come by.

"Ah - that? I heard it from the head of our village", answered the fairy as a matter of course. Laying on its back with legs outstretched, it continued with a triumphant air.

"And so, it's been decided that only Contractor-sama can rescue our family from crisis. I was sent because I was a close acquaintance."

"…that so?"

close acquaintance - who are you talking about?

Although harboring that that sort of feeling, he can't flatly refuse the request of the patriarch of the fairy village. Kazuma pressed forward.

"So, what is that request?"

"This is a major incident!"

Planning to display its anger, the fairy rose slightly higher than Kazuma and talked on and on leaning forward.

"Recently humans have entered the village and stole the family's treasure!"

Contrastive to the excited fairy, Kazuma replied in a sober tone.

"…Well, that happens often."

"No, it doesn't! Even the patriarch said it is unparalleled in history!"

"That's wrong", Kazuma declared with absolute confidence.

The fairy's village is placed in a slightly different dimension from the material world humans inhabit. Therefore, by physical means it absolutely cannot be reached.

"I don't know whether it is unprecedented or not but it will happen again. No matter how secure barriers will you form, in front of human greed, they are powerless"

For the sake of satisfying one's desire humans conquered all hardships. Even if a dimensional barrier were to block their way, if it is necessary, it will, without exception be smashed.

What's more, they don't pay attention to the damage inflicted on others.

The affirmation of all desires - whether they are good or evil, that is mankind's course of action - Kazuma knew it so.

"Don't be so proud of such a thing…"

"It doesn't mean I am particularly proud of it. I am simply pointing out the truth."

Even because of those eyes obviously filled with blame, Kazuma doesn't falter. Throwing out his chest with dignity, he affirms himself.

"Moving on, the request is to find the treasure, right?"

"Uh-huh. That's right. If we don't have it, our entire existence will be in danger!"

Seeming convinced that the request was already heard, the fairy began dancing, looking glad. While quietly starring at that appearance, Kazuma let out the essential question.

"Will there be a reward?"

The fairy petrified in the middle of her dance. Voiceless, eyes and mouth forming 3 separate O's, it stared at Kazuma. Kazuma also, calmly stared back at her. Not less than one full minute, they stared at each other.

"…errrr…Contractor-sama…"

Finally pulling herself together, the fairy asked Kazuma in a cracked voice.

"What?"

"Contractor-sama, you made a contract with the spirits of the wind and became a Contractor, right…?"

"Yes", Kazuma nodded in assent.

"And because of that, well…we, the pixies, are fairies affiliated with the wind, you could say the relatives of wind spirits…"

"Thank you for especially teaching me such an obvious thing. What of it?"

"So,…well, as for the proxy of the King of the Spirits on this earth, isn't it natural to help his family in times of crisis, don't you think?"

"…Ah, I see."

Smiling sweetly, Kazuma kindly extended a hand to the fairy. He softly wrapped his hand around that small body, treating it like fragile glass work.

"Listen up, **bug**."

"No, hear me out, I'm not a…"

With that firm smile that clung to him like a mask, Kazuma inserted little by little more power in the hand grabbing the fairy.

"Wow - putting one's life on the line for the proof of one's identity, huh? Not what I've hoped for but that way of life can't be evaluated."

"Auuu…fine, something like me, just an insect…"

Yielding to terror, the fairy sold her pride. Kazuma nodded.

"Listen really close, bug. You should know about me that just because I made a contract with the King of Spirits, it doesn't mean I am burdened with some special sort of special duty."

"S-sneaky…does that mean that you took all the power without any sort of risk?"

"Yeah", Kazuma boldly declared tossing the fairy.

"That's why, if you want to request something from me, start by showing me the stack of cash. I'll listen to your story after that."

Saying those words he turned his back on the thrown out fairy and started walking.

It wasn't a strategy, much less a joke. Kazuma considered this discussion already over.

"Wh - wait a minute!"

The dumbfounded fairy, seeing off his retreating figure, flew before Kazuma in a panic.

"I understand, we'll give you some of our village's treasure."

"…a fairy's treasure?" Kazuma frowned, very suspicious.

"Something like glass beds or pretty stones you picked by the river or insect shells or - "

"The fairy village is not a crow's nest! We have lots of gold and gems, you know!?"

Just by hearing that, Kazuma's facial expression didn't cheer up. Looking up at that fairy with that apathetic face, he casually said:

"How much of those?"

"Uuu, huh…"

"There doesn't seem to be a big amount, huh? If your family is in crisis hand over at least half of everything you own!"

"You'll go that far!?"

"That's the foundation of business, you know", Kazuma heartlessly declared to the whining fairy.

With sulky eyes, she glared at Kazuma.

"…I have to consult the patriarch"

After all, it became like this.

"Please do. And - "

Nodding proudly, Kazuma suddenly changed the topic.

"About the treasure, what is it?"

"Eh?"

"So, the shape, the material, its function or something like that. If you don't tell me about those I can't search for it."

After understanding the meaning of those words, the gloomy, depressed fairy's facial expression began to shine. She shouted with vigor.

"You came around!?"

Answering to the fairy's smiling face, Kazuma also broadly grinned.

"If it's the treasure of the fairy village, I pray it has enough value to satisfy me."

Instantly the fairy remembered that optical illusion-like mouth that seemed to split until ears. Timidly, she asked:

"Say…just for reference, what will you do if it doesn't satisfy you?"

"Annihilation, isn't it obvious?"

"…isn't it obvious…"

Toward the fairy, involuntarily repeating it, Kazuma grinned all the more.

"When that time comes, you will be the last to go. After burning in your memory that the destruction of your family was the result of the rashness of your speech, you can die."

Sizing it in his hand for the third time, Kazuma laughed enjoying himself from the bottom of his heart. If, from that back bat-like wings and a pointed tail were to appear because she was hallucinating, that is definitely not the fairy's responsibility. "Auuuu…"

"Well then…"

Permitting for a while the fairy's scream, Kazuma returned to the topic.

"Enough idle talk, tell me the job details."

"Well, you see…to call the announcement of my entire family's annihilation idle talk…"

"You're noisy. So, what kind of treasure is it?"

"This kind"

Smoothly escaping Kazuma's hand, the fairy's and his head touched each other. Through the contact portion, the "treasure"'s image poured into Kazuma's brain.

"…a seed?"

That was the first impression. Unidentified life force, so to speak.

The strong pounding wave, from within the shell, rose ready to burst open.

"What on Earth is this?"

Being asked so, the fairy looked away. After its eyes wondered about for a while, it looked at Kazuma, waiting for an answer, with an upward glance.

"Let me see…that is something like a trade secret…no?"

"What sort of business?…well, it doesn't matter."

Although riposting, Kazuma easily allowed the secret. He had no interest in a treasure he can't take hold of and obtained only the necessary information for searching. There's no meaning investigating further.

"Then show me the points the humans invaded through. We'll follow from there."

The wind will certainly remember the treasure's presence. No matter how advanced the enemy's shielding was, Kazuma had confidence he could locate it less than 24 hours.

"Eh? Ah, that's fine. Because we know where it is."

"What? - Ah, so that's the reason."

The answer to the question that came to mind, Kazuma instantly found it by himself. In other words the commission wasn't for a search but for a recovery.

"The place it is this way."

The fairy touched his hear with hers for a second time. Deriving the name of the place from the information flowing in, Kazuma's eyes faintly opened wider.

"…Ah? This is - "

"Something wrong?"

"Nothing. Leaving that aside, bug, are you coming too?"

"Yeah, I'm coming. - By the way, Contractor-sama?"

Resigned but including a faint hope, the fairy looked at Kazuma.



"Do you remember my name?"

"No."

Instant reply. Incidentally he had no guilty feeling about it. The fairy named herself with a sigh.

"It's Tiana. Please treat me favorably, Contractor-sama."

"Stop that. Kazuma is fine."

When Kazuma told her his name, the fairy - Tiana corrected herself, looking glad.

"Please treat me favorably, Kazuma◎ ".

"Use Kazuma-sama."

"…"

"It's a joke."

"…teh"

Overwhelmed by anger, she pretended to throw kicks from Kazuma's back.

Ei! Ei!! I give up!!!

After the one-two punch, a reversal left hook and then a left, low hit finish stroked Kazuma's phantasm, Tiana finally felt refreshed.

However, she was careless. Kazuma was a Fuujutsushi - within a certain range his perception had no blind spots.

“I saw that.”

“Fukyaaa.”

The small wind pebble flied together with the cold reply, delivering a hard blow on Tiana’s face.

Part 3

"Kazumaaaaa, it's boring ~ "

From inside the improvised wind cage, Tiana's boredom leaked out.

"Hey, Kazumaaaa - fugyuuu!?"

Eliminating reply time, Kazuma shrunk the wing cage, putting screws on Tiana. When her complexion became bluish-purple and the restrains became loose he shortly informed her.

"Shut up."

"Auuuuu…"

Disregarding the fairy's groans, Kazuma shifted his focus outside of the window. The streaming landscape. Because the sun already set, the place of destination supposed to be beyond that point couldn't be seen. Even if that is supposed to be the highest place in Japan.

"A train? Why a train? If it were me, I would fly."

"Then fly. By yourself."

That exchange of words already happened two hours ago.

Even forcibly, about no choosing a different course of action, Kazuma was regretting it vehemently. The fact that the pixies are mischievous creatures it's a universally known legend. But, for most people it seems that they regard that mischief counterbalancing the lovely outward appearance as something charming. They are absolutely wrong.

The pixies pranks are plenty disagreeable. Breaking items that would have lasted a lifetime or changing outcomes to force people into unpleasant situations - they will do them without hesitation. Tiana was no exception.

Opening the running train's door all of a sudden, erasing the window glass where children bent forward to see outside, causing poltergeist phenomena into the driver's seat.

And lastly - it's unknown how she did it, but when she managed a train barrel roll, Kazuma's patience cord was severed. Keeping her in a wind cage, he sealed her entire movement.

Tiana may be complaining but considering this is Kazuma, it's possible to say this is a remarkably generous step. Without speech and attitude, it's possible

she has nothing but some residual part of race awareness.

"Kazumaaa, let me out…"

Otsuki ~ Otsuki

Covering Tiana's voice, obstinately begging, the announcer informed about the arrival at the place of destination. Watching Kazuma get up in silence, Tiana's eyes sparkled.

With this, he'll let me out!

But, far from releasing her, he let the wind cage itself behind, got off the train and started walking.

"…Eh? W-wait!?"

Without response to the frantic voice, calling to halt, the train slowly started to move. From the window Tiana looked at the station platform. In the middle of the scene that started to flow little by little, just once, Kazuma waved his hand.

"…Ah…Ah…"

It's body shaking with anger, the fairy shouted as far as possible.

"Kazuma, you idiot!"

That scream that couldn't shake the atmosphere reached no one's ears.

Approximately 10 minutes afterwards.

“Kazumaaaaaaaaaaa!!”

From behind a motorcycle sprinting on the dark street, a screaming light ball was approaching. The light ball suddenly stopped right beside Kazuma’s face. Maybe because the relative velocity was equal, the figure of the girl growing wings inside the light and even her angry expression could be perceived in detail.

Shifting his attention to her only for a second, he muttered, bored-looking.

“That was unexpectedly quick.”

“Why did you do that? Leaving someone behind, how terrible!”

“Well, I hesitated.”

It wasn’t about whether or not to take someone along.

“Not that sort of indulgent method but whether or not I ought to deal with you before, to eliminate future trouble.”

“…tch!”

Involuntarily, the imagining of "eliminate future trouble" drew Tiana's attention. Thinking about his behavior so far, there is no room for doubt. This man is serious.

"Auuuuuuu~ I won't pull pranks anymore so don't kill me!"

To the lamenting fairy, Kazuma showed a cynical smile.

"Ho - Can you take responsibility for those words? Next time I'll deal with you in a conclusive manner."

a conclusive manner - an abstract expression and yet that meaning was excessively tangible.

Trembling in fear, Tiana nodded soundlessly.

"…humph"

Faintly slanting his lips, Kazuma twisted the acceleration. Tiana chased in a panic that speeding up bike. Both of them aimed at the destination straight ahead. The vast forest stretching out at the bottom of Japan's highest peak rising in front of them, Mt. Fuji, the Aokigahara Forest.

"Hey, hey."

Even after promising to be a good child, Tiana can't be silent more than one minute. Even humans can be like this at times. Those who can't endure psychological silence.

"Where did you get that vehicle?"

It was a natural question. A more accurate one would be not "where" but "by what means". At any rate it would have been impossible to make preparations for riding on a plot of land he had no plans of visiting.

Kazuma replied simply.

"I borrowed it."

"Borrowed? Really? Maybe there are kind people after all."

Holding no sarcasm, those were sincere, praising words. The superficial comprehension towards human society in addition to humans themselves allowed such misunderstanding.

"Indeed. The society has not yet degraded so."

A brazen declaration. By the way Tiana didn't notice that Kazuma's garments too, subtly changed. As one would expect, he thought the down jacket to be

ugly and changed it to a dark gray jacket. Perhaps this is also a borrowed item.

In any case, after nothing but traveling for a dozen of minutes, in the middle of the national highway going through the sea of the trees, Kazuma located a private road, quiet and secluded.

"This way, huh?"

"Yeah."

Abandoning the bike Kazuma jumped over an iron fence pretending to be broken. And then, after several jumps riding the wind, both of them arrived at a slightly elevated hill overlooking a magnificent residence built in the mysterious sea of trees.

"These guys?"

A murmur shaking in delight. The rising urge lifted his lips and a small laughter leaked out.

"I see. So they were these guys…"

"…Errr, I'm afraid to ask but are they your acquaintances?", Tiana timidly asked while flinching at the dangerous, carnivore-like smile.

"No, they're not personal acquaintances."

Kazuma clearly shook his head, while that ferocious smile still clinging to his face.

"But…since while back I couldn't help but want to crush these guys."

"Wh-What kind of people are they?"

"These guys are…"

"…well, if it were me instead of him, I'd kill you instantly."

"Auuuuuu ~ I don't want to die."

While weeping, Tiana clung to Kazuma.

"Hey! If it's Kazuma, can you search where it went!? Can you!? Please, I'll pay an extra charge."

"Well - calm down."

"I can't calm down!!"

"Listen up! Look this way."

Kazuma turned around Tiana's head with all his might. Somehow he had a feeling its neck-bones made a somewhat thick sound but there is no meaning in paying attention to the head of such random living things like fairies.

"Auuuuuuuu~"

Kazuma quietly but with a sharp voice murmured close to the I-don't-know-why-but-fainting-in-agony fairy's ears.

"Look properly inside the mansion. Do you see?"

The residence was approximately 100 meters away. Furthermore it was night. The things that could be seen with a physical eye were only the outlines of the mansion. But -

"Huh? Isn't it kind of noisy?"

As far as Fuujutsushi and Pixies are concerned, both of them are companions of the wind spirits and reading the information the wind is carrying is easy.

Just as Tiana said, the residence's atmospheric was uproarious. Disturbance and impatience and the mayhem caused by them were transmitted as far as below the two.

"I wonder what happened."

"Well, it doesn't seem they are merely busy. Perhaps the disappearance of the treasure was an unexpected accident for that lot."

"You mean, that it was again stolen by a different someone. Doesn't that mean it will be more difficult to search!?"

Kazuma lightly shrug his shoulders.

"It's not like you'll be troubled if I don't find it personally."

"I'll be troubled!!"

Cruelly brushing away Tiana's half-cries he aimed a daring gaze at the mansion.

"Leaving jokes aside let's take a closer look."

Kazuma lightly kicked the ground. Enveloped by the whirling wind that body smoothly shook off the gravity's restraint. Shortening the distance by 10 meters with each jump, he stopped 20 meters from the mansion and stood still in the air above it. Tiana, running after him asked:

"Won't we be exposed? If we are so close?"

"It's safe", Kazuma assured her.

At any rate, the opponent is the Tsuwabuki Family - a family of Chijutsushis. They don't have techniques for detecting things that aren't connected to the ground.

"Well then - "

Concentrating his consciousness, he searched for useful information. As long as the other party is in a place with air, there is nothing an Enjutsushi can't spy on. Whether it's a distance of 20 meters, obstacles such as roofs and walls, for them it's equal with zero. Setting apart useless information as noise and picking up only the necessary one.

The tuning was immediately over. A little grazed alto was reached Kazuma's ears.

- you haven't captured it yet?

Yes - but we have perfectly caught hold of its presence and now it's only a matter of time…

Not particularly. However splendid that is, The Grand Festival is tomorrow, do you understand?

"A - Already…"

At the impossible to decipher conversation, Tiana looked slightly doubtful at Kazuma.

"What is The Grand Festival?"

Without answering, Kazuma closed his eyes partly. Feeling the temperature falling below freezing at once, Tiana backed off shivering.

"I see - " with an icy smile etched to his face, Kazuma murmured slightly.

"It was this year, that thing?"

"Th - that thing?" too reckless Tiana asked a second time. But this time there was an answer.

"I said it earlier, didn't I? About that evil sacrificing ceremony. It seems they do it at intervals of approximately 30 years, on the first full moon night of the new year. In short, tomorrow night."

"You're well informed, huh?"

"Because it's a famous ritual."

Kazuma spit out unpleasantly.

"These fellows, far from hiding the use of sacrificing, they take pride in it, instead."

"Hmm - So, there is some connection between that ceremony and the treasure they stole from the pixie village?"

"There must be. As far as the Tsuwabuki are concerned, the ceremony is more important than anything. Because the rite is so close, there's no way they have enough composure to be concerned with unrelated stuff - but I have no idea what they'll use it for."

"That cannot be allowed - "

Silencing Tiana, who started screaming, Kazuma restarted the reconnaissance, this time projecting visual information.

Do hurry. I don' care about means. As the head's representative, you have permission to act freely.

In one of the mansion's rooms, a woman ordered the group of men. Kazuma focused on that woman.

dark - more than anything, that was the impression she made. The hair was oddly long. Darker than

darkness itself, that straight glossy hair was falling like a waterfall as far as her knees. A black suit. It seemed a long straight skirt was coiling around her legs, but a deep slit on its left revealed almost all her thigh.

She was approximately in the later half of her twenties. Although amazingly beautiful, she was so bewitching she didn't seem human. From a distance she was a sight for sore eyes, and yet the type you didn't want to get to know. She seemed to be younger than the men surrounding her but there wasn't a single person appearing to look down on her.

All their foreheads were sweating, imploring the woman in a good mood.

If it seems we won't make it in time, we have no choice but to call Mayumi back.

…!!

At those matter of course words, the men were vehemently disturbed.

Kureha-sama, that would be against the Head's intention -

Silence!

That woman everyone called Kureha raised her head triumphantly.

Now that my father is sick, I am the one ruling over Tsuwabuki. Do you complain?

N - no…we wouldn't…

Aiming a cynical smile at the overpowered, drained in cold sweat men, Kazuma whistles frivolously.

"Scary woman."

But that face suddenly became stiff. Kureha suddenly looked at the ceiling.

"…Ah? Oi, you don't say…"

That severe glance pierced the ceiling, directly grasping him. Although understanding it, that impossible fact halted his thought process. A lethal space was born.

who?

Simultaneously shouting for Kazuma's identity, his body was rapidly drawn to the surface.

"W - wait a second! What the heck is this?"

There's no way his wind was stopped. With a force by far surpassing the dynamic lift the wind produced, something dragged Kazuma to the ground.

What on earth is this!? But first, how did she noticed? Did she changed the dust in the atmosphere in a radar or something?

While Kazuma was confused, Kureha briskly gave direction to those men.

"There's a trespasser in the sky. I'll drop him off here so counter attack! "

"…Y-yes!", the men nodded obediently.

Although not understanding, it seems they put all their trust in Kureha's power. The eyes looking up at the ceiling held not a speck of doubt, storing power, preparing the one finishing blow for the intruder who will fall.

This is pretty bad, huh?, Kazuma whispered at his wit's end while falling.

This was not far from a crisis. Since he doesn't know by what kind of ability he is dragged down, it's impossible to resist. He tried to ease up the speed of the fall with wind, but it had almost no effect.

As if his body's weight was increased ten, no more then a hundred times.

…that's it!

Kazuma swung downward a wind blade. Just because of that one stroke the field of that invisible power was cut cross-section-ally while the back-lash eased up the speed of the fall. But it was already too late -

Gonn! Gogann!

Smashing down the roof and the ceiling, Kazuma fell into the Tsuwabuki residence. Of course, the wind was doing the smashing, it's not like his life was in danger, but it wasn't a pleasant feeling.

"Don't underestimate us!"

Barely managing to land, he used wind to counterbalance the Chijutsushi's attack coming from every direction. If they were to include one more blow, he would have obliterated everyone here.

"Fugyaaaa!"

But, Tiana's existence, falling on his head at that precise time turned away the chance to attack.

"…"

Without saying anything, Kazuma gripped the fairy from the top of his head and threw it onto the ground.

"Auuuuuuuu~"

"Good grief - "

After looking down on the groaning fairy very annoyed, he turned his eyes to the surroundings.

Because that attack supposed to deliver a certain kill was brushed off, the Chijutsushi peeled their eyes in fright. But, that wasn't all.

"F - fairy…?"

The man's eyes looked intensely at Tiana. Not the questioning look asking why the fairy is here.

Disturbance and surprise - a face that knows more than enough. Seeing that, Kazuma raised his lips. Kicking up a scattered-on-the-floor Tiana and sizing it, he shouted clearly:

"You people, who devastated the fairy village! Know that the sins of blockheads like you will never be forgiven! We won't let you use our treasure for your wicked ceremony. Know that tomorrow evening is the time this family will be ruined!"

Together with that bombastic pronouncement they escaped through the hole opened in the ceiling. Before the dumbfounded, completely played Chijutsushi calmed down, Kazuma's figure disappeared beyond the sea of trees.

"What was that at the end?"

Putting a 10 minutes distance from Tsuwabuki, properly sitting down on tree branches, Tiana asked with a stunned expression. Kazuma answered with a smile:

"A confirmation tentative and the last one, well, I just went with the flow. There's no meaning behind it."

The fairy's existence and Kazuma's words clearly disturbed them. But more then that, the positive proof that the Tsuwabuki family stole the fairy's treasure was obtained.

"Hmmm - So, what will you do next?"

"I'll wait", Kazuma replied simply.

"Only that?"

"From the conversation earlier, it seemed they grasped the treasure's whereabouts. They said they would search for it. There's no need for me to work, right?"

"…"

Without taking action, stealing the opponent's result - even if Tiana thought that was an absolute makeshift method, she kept her silence and her wisdom.

One way or another, it seemed she had at least a little learning ability.

"Ku ku ku"

Thinking of something, Kazuma revealed an exceedingly enjoyable chuckle.

"If I keep hidden the fact that the secret treasure has been returned I'd be able to do what I wanted. Taking the moral high ground so to speak. I'll ask nicely so don't return it without a fight, alright?"

"Ku ku ku ku - "

Exactly as stated a while ago, he appears to plan the complete destruction of the Tsuwabuki. That the drifting smell of blood will be filling that dangerous, limitless laughter, Tiana was scared from the marrow of her bones.

Why? Why!?

While frantically plugging her ears, for the first time in her life, she complained to the King of the Wind Spirits.

Why did You make this kind of man Your Contractor!? That was absolutely, absolutely a mistake!

Whether the fairy's bitter soul scream reached the King of the Wind Spirits or not, only the spirit king knew.

Chapter 3: The Person One Must Protect

Part 1

"…"

Inside the train, Ren was frozen solid.He sat in such a way that if someone poked him, he would roll on the floor while in sitting position.

The reason for that was the existence of the girl sitting earnestly on his left side, Ayumi. She was clinging to Ren's left arm in order for their bodies to be glued as close as possible.

At the beginning of her teens, wearing a coat over the still immature body, although the sensation wasn't supposed to be very fresh, it's still impossible to be composed about it.

Contrastive to Ayumi, who yielded herself to Ren with a peaceful appearance, his brain has been frozen for the last 10 minutes.

- It happened approximately 10 minutes before.

At the time they waited for the train on the platform of Tokyo Station, staring at Ren shivering from

the coldness of the wind, Ayumi asked in a worried manner:

"Are you cold?"

"No, I'm fine."

Ren showed a smile meant to give her a piece of mind but the next moment that smile became frozen.

"a… a… a… Ayumi-chan?"

"If we are like this it's warm, right?"

Feeling guilty for borrowing his coat and trying to transfer her own body temperature, she clung to Ren's arm.

"D-don't do that -"

Ren's brain, trying to separate his body, was pierced by Ayumi's expression, looking at him with upturned eyes.

"-No?"

"Eh, ah, no, that sort of…"

A stuttering Ren. He was unbelievably ashamed, he also thought this sort of thing is wrong, but before the girl's gaze, looking at him sadly, he couldn't shake his head.

What to do…

The warm sense of touch transmitted by his left arm thoroughly snatched Ren's presence of mind. After that, when, how did they get into the train, he didn't remember any of it.

"I'm sorry."

"-Eh?"

Receiving such an abrupt apology, Ren's consciousness recovered after a long time. Ayumi's turned away expression, full of guilt was reflected in his eyes.

"About what?"

"For making such an odd request."

Ren replied while laughing.

"It's not a big deal, this much."

Actually the girl's wish was simple. What it required were traveling expenses and a little bit of time. Just those will suffice.

Take me to the sea.

That's what Ayumi spoke in the park. It was just one wish. Naturally, Ren had no objection.

Investigating those contents for a while, he asked only one thing.

"Is a harbor-like place acceptable? Or a sandy beach?"

Without wavering, Ayumi chose the latter. Therefore, together they boarded the Tokaido Line. That route was aimed at Chigasaki.

If that was the nearest swimming beach, Ren doesn't know. But that was the only place he could lead her to. Because of his family's line of work he is a boy unrelated to family vacations et cetera. He had hardly any experience of swimming in the sea. Ren was deeply grateful to the girl who took him by force sea bathing last year's summer.

While chasing the flowing scenery, Ayumi murmured:

"In the end, I wanted to see something beautiful with my own eyes."

"In the end, you say?"

"When I do so, I'm going back. To the Tsuwabuki."

"No!", Ren promptly shouted.

"No! They don't treat you like a fellow human. Only like a tool. If you return to those people you'll never be happy. If you have no place to go, you can come to

my house. The Kannagi Clan will, without exception -
"

"Ren, you see-"

Ayumi quietly interrupted Ren's desperate pleading words.

"Have you heard about the Tsuwabuki's Grand Festival?"

"The Grand Festival - about that ceremony to appease the volcanic activity of Mt. Fuji? I'm not very familiar with it but the practitioner always lost his life… "

Going that far, Ren turned a terrified glance towards Ayumi.

"No…way…"

What was reflected in those eyes was Ayumi's excessively tranquil smiling face. It was unbelievable. Ren completely denied that expression. There shouldn't be something like that. Such a thing cannot be allowed. Something like that- something like that-

"I have no family name, nor a family register, naming myself is not permitted, but-"

No way.

I don't want to hear.

Despite this - the body doesn't move. Even blocking his ears, he can't do it. Without waiting for agreement or disagreement, pouring into his ears, that tone calm as the surface of the lake. Admitting everything, allowing it, accepting it.

"I am called Tsuwabuki. According to the lineage, something like a direct descendant."

I don't want to hear it.

"The ceremony is tomorrow night. Therefore, I must get back until then. Because I- because I am the priest of the ritual."

Because I am the priest of the ceremony.

From Ren's body, with a water-like sound, blood flew backwards.

The Yamatsumino Grand Festival - the origin of it goes back roughly 300 years.

The year is 1707 - during the Houei era was the last volcanic eruption of Mt. Fuji and the greatest since the dawn of history. The violent eruption reaching 15 days, it was said that the volcanic ash fell as far as the distant town of Edo. It was not only Kantō but a life or death crisis for Japan itself. No matter how many

times Mt. Fuji erupted, it didn't show any signs of quieting down.

That raging <Ki> finally resulted in the embodiment of one demon beast. The impersonation of Fuji's <ki>. It is certain that was the largest, strongest devilishness that materialized in this country. If one tried to rank it among other demon beasts, the only reference it had would be the legendary monsters, like the eight tail serpent that couldn't be defeated without the help of god's power.

The beast's roar beckoned eruptions and its stepping feet invoked eruptions. Mowing down everything it touched, it exhausted the limits of tyranny. The ones who sealed it were the yet unknown Tsuwabuki family. A young girl leading the family offered prayers to the King of the Earth Spirits for seven days and seven nights and finally attained that divine protection.

And then, by that divine protection, the girl managed to seal that demon beast. Thus Mt. Fuji calmed down and Japan's peace was protected. And they all lived happily ever after.

-But that story has sequel.

First, that girl was not able to endure the release of such an over-sized power and lost her life with the seal. And then, even after applying such a powerful seal, the demon beast's lock couldn't continue forever. Being the personification of an active volcano, it's possible to say that was the unavoidable outcome.

Approximately 30 years - that was the limit of the seal. For the sake of continuing the sealing of a raging demon beast seeking release, Tsuwabuki family had no choice but to conduct the ceremony at fixed intervals for the sake of suppressing Mt. Fuji's <Ki>.

Because of the divine protection of the Spirit King that dwelt in their blood - the strongest unmarried woman was elected as the priest of the ceremony.

Until today, the sealing ceremony known under the bombastic name of "Grand Festival" took place 8 times. And there were 8 casualties. The fatality ratio was 100%. This is the reason the ceremony practitioner was named sacrifice.

With no other option, the 9th ceremony approached. The girl called Ayumi was a lamb led to slaughter.

How long was he in blank amazement, I wonder. When Ren came to his senses, Ayumi was smiling gently, looking at him.

Unable to meet that extremely pitiful smile, Ren muttered, while looking down.

"Why?…"

"Ren?"

"Why do you have to do such a…"

After examining for a short while Ren's expression, Ayumi replied:

"Because someone has to do it."

"But it doesn't have to be you-"

Ayumi softly touched Ren's lips with her fingers. The boy who unintentionally couldn't keep his mouth shut, she rebuked him gently.

"It's not good saying these kind of things. If you speak filthy words your heart will become filthy too."

"…I'm sorry…"

Ayumi shook her head.

"No. It's alright. Truthfully I was a little happy. Because I was never regarded as something valuable."

From the moment she was born, it was decided that Ayumi will be a sacrifice. She wasn't regarded as

part of the same family, not recognized as a human being. For this girl with no family register, with no choice but being a tool for the ceremony, so far there wasn't a single person to hold her life dear.

Pointlessly, Ren made sure of her acknowledgement.

"Even so, you'll do it? For the sake of those who think of you as a tool?"

"It's different", Ayumi flatly shook her head.

"It has nothing to do with the Tsuwabuki family's expectations. Because it must be done no matter what, I'll do it. It's bad if Mt. Fuji erupts, right?"

"That is true…"

"If I am able to suppress it, my life, my death is not worthless.Even if the physical me dies, my prayers will fuse with the mountain and I will continue to watch over this country eternally. That's a very beautiful thing, don't you agree?"

"…"

Something is wrong. Something is terribly wrong, Ren thought so.

-Don't try to glorify death with words of self-sacrifice -

Kazuma's words, once intended for him were recalled to his mind. Doesn't Ayumi make the same mistake he did at the same time? But Ren had no persuasion words for the girl. He could not think of a path that doesn't result in Ayumi's death.

Only to let Mt. Fuji erupt-

To replace Ayumi as a sacrifice.

She would accept neither. There is no mistake about it, the girl known as Ayumi was the type that would sacrifice herself for others.

"That's why I'm not afraid of death. It's because I was born for this purpose. And yet, I desired memories before the time comes. Memories of my own, born from my own experience."

In that peaceful pupil, that accepted everything dwelt the light of a faint longing.

Memories of her own?

It's only natural to display a strong attachment for one's dying wish. But even so, that was a strange expression. Memories are neither true nor false.

To the bewildered Ren, Ayumi threw another bomb.

"You see, I don't have my own memories."

"Eh?"

"I haven't lost my memories. It's not like I have something to remember and I don't, it's more like I have *nothing* to remember."

"…"

Without saying anything, Ren starred at Ayumi dumbfounded.

"If it would be just like that, even speaking and moving my body would have been impossible. But the me right now is something ignorant of the ways of the world but I can communicate with other people. Do you know why?"

"Wasn't it because you kept studying it?"

Toward such an unbelievable circumstance, Ren said so, including a ray of hope.

But, as feared, Ayumi shook her head.

"In my head there are transcripts of another's memories. I don't know how it's been done, though."

Almost like it was somebody else's problem, Ayumi indifferently recited those grand circumstances. Ren finally had the feeling he understood the reason why Ayumi had no attachment to her life. She had nothing to be particular about.

Not even recognized as a person, her existence valued as nothing but a tool, day after day. Planted forged memories. Without beginning, Ayumi's life ended.

With no room to harbor hope, she has no attachment except despair. Together with that gentle resignation, Ayumi accepted everything.

"That's why I wanted to see the world through my eyes even if it's just once. I wished for something that's not faked, real memories."

Like telling an unfulfilled dream, Ayumi whispered with a distant look. Toward the ordinary everyone was given as a natural privilege - no, the privilege they took for granted she felt endless longing and envy.

"The moment I saw the sky when I first left the residence, I was very surprised. How vast was the sky windows don't limit, Mt. Fuji was so big…"

"Ayumi-chan…"

"The sky, the stars, the moon were so much more beautiful than what I remembered. Surely, the sea must be very beautiful, right?"

The silhouette of the innocent girl in high spirits was reflected in Ren's eyes as overbearingly pitiful.

-She wanted to see beautiful things-

What sort of feelings did she include when she said those words? The words of a girl dreaming, escaping from reality, now that he knew everything, they were unbelievably heavy.

"-This is hopeless."

With a strong determination, Ren muttered in his heart.

Such a thing cannot be. It cannot be forgiven.

"Ayumi-chan!"

"W-what?"

His immature sense of justice aroused, Red declared strongly.

"I will protect Ayumi-chan."

" - Ren?"

"So please, don't give up. Don't say it's OK to die. Because I'll protect you. I'll protect you for sure."

"Ren…"

Making a somewhat troubled face, she looked at the boy making a vow.

Joy and sadness and the kindness of a mother watching over her child were mixed in that complex gaze.

Without noticing that gaze, Ren continued.

"I'm sure it exists. A way in which Ayumi-chan doesn't have to die. I'll do whatever it's in my power. My own ability may be very small but if it's big brother, surely- "

"Your older brother?"

"Eh?"

Ayumi unintentionally asked in return and Ren reaffirmed with force those entrusting words.

"Ah-"

In those cornered eyes hope was shining.

"That's right! I have my older brother! If it's big brother, he will definitely save you!"

Without a fragment of anxiety, with absolute faith in his voice, Ren clearly declared.

For a short while, Ayumi opened her eyes wide, staring at the smile of the boy, delighted as if the problem was already settled.

"Do you have such an amazing brother?"

"Yeah", Ren answered without a moment's hesitation.

"Big brother is stronger than anyone. There is nothing he can't do. I'm sure."

"…Is that so…"

"So please don't say such lonesome things like last memories and let's do many more together. I want to show you many other things. That is…"

Embarrassed and blushing Ren invited the girl screwing up his courage.

"Because - I'll take you no matter where."

"…"

Receiving Ren's invitation, for one instant, Ayumi seemed to burst into tears. However, in just one moment she erased that bitter expression and replied with a calm and somewhat sad smile.

"Right…If we could do that, it would be very nice…"

Part 2

"I wonder where did big brother go…"

Descending on the platform of the Chiwasaki Station, the shore on the other side of it, Ren muttered to himself with a worried face.

He can't get in touch with Kazuma.

He called Kazuma's cellphone from the station's public telephone but what came back was the dull announcement of the answering machine.

Because his own cellphone broke, he can't wait for Kazuma to get in touch with him. In the end, leaving the message "I'll call again" Ren hanged the receiver.

"I'm beaten."

As soon as he complained, Ayumi's hand, holding his left arm, tightly hugged him. Flustered, Ren showed a bright smile meant to give her peace of mind.

"Oh, it's fine. Because we'll get in touch shortly."

" -yeah", Ayumi nodded a little.

For a little while they didn't speak. Both of them walked the road to the beach in silence.

"Ah…"

A sound resembling noise making her eardrums vibrate, Ayumi strained her ears. The term sea roar came to her mind.

"The sound of waves…?"

"Yeah. We'll be there shortly."

Nodding, Ren increased his pace to not fall behind Ayumi, who unconsciously did so.

And now -

"Ah - !"

At the magnificent view at last reflected in her eyes Ayumi raised her voice in delight. Ren looked in the came direction. It was the sea. The great deep stretching endlessly. The utmost blue sea surface sparkling in the downpour of sunshine - naturally, it wasn't.

The winter sea is cold and hollow. It doesn't have a particle of the heat and energy the summer sea is full of, instead it's pushing out a cold surface, almost like rejecting humans. Staring at the utmost black sea, the same color as the night sky, Ayumi muttered:

"Is this… The sea…?"

Perceiving the sound of a clear disappointment, Ren became impatient.

"W-what to do…"

Thinking now about it, it was a problem he should have noticed earlier. The winter sea - at night. Seen by girl his age it can't be a pleasing spectacle. Anyway, there was definitely not enough light. But there are at least seven, eight hours until dawn breaks.

If I had light…light -?

The idea that reflexively occurred to him was suppressed at an almost instinctive level. His family admonished sternly such conduct. But, even so-

Do it!

After just 3 seconds of hesitation, Ren decided to dismiss good sense. For his peace of mind, turning around, he searched for indications of human presence, surveying the surroundings.

From what he roughly saw, there was none except them.

- It must be done now.

Summoning fire spirits, he shortly informed:

"Go"

" - Eh? What?"

Before Ayumi finished her second question - the sky exploded.

"Kyaa!?"

The golden light shines out far and white pressing down the darkness. The brightness spreading out on the entire surface of the sky dyed the world golden and the jet black sea surface glittered dazzlingly.

"This - this is…Ren?"

To the Ayumi starring up in succession to both the sky and Ren with a surprised gaze, somewhat embarrassed but at the same time very proud, Ren's nostrils twitched.

"It's impossible to replicate the midsummer sea, but it's better than the pitch black gloomy sea, right? How is it? Do you like it?"

"Ren- "

Calling out Ren's name with a voice trembling with delight, Ayumi gave Ren a bear-like hug.

"Amazing! It's amazing! It is the most beautiful thing I've seen!"

"R-really? I'm glad"

Although confused by Ayumi's bold conduct, the relaxation of Ren's cheeks was irrepressible. Ayumi's large smile - even if he tried to express it, it's magnificence was beyond words.

Underneath the gold radiance, they innocently smiled at each other and looked up at the sky. Just like a golden aurora borealis the movement of the dancing fire spirits combined and the canopy covering the entire sky changed the same way a kaleidoscope would.

"Beautiful…but won't it cause an uproar?"

Ren shrugged his shoulders in silence. Without even thinking, it was an obvious matter. This was not a solitary island in the southern sea. Approachable by walking from the train station it was an empty swimming area.

Although there was a shelter-belt and a fence obstructing the field of vision, a highway was running less than 10 meters away. The houses were close. Without having to wait, it's likely spectators with burning curiosity would arrive in great numbers. There's no mistake that it will appear in tomorrow's newspaper.

But even so, Ren didn't care.

To make Ayumi happy - right now, for Ren it was all that mattered. Seeing Ayumi's wet eyes, Ren asked her casually, as if inquiring about the dinner's menu.

"Do you want to keep it up just a little bit more? Before long it could cause trouble but if they get in the way I'll drive them away."

"…No, it's enough."

After considering for a short while, Ayumi shook her head.

"It's enough. Because I'll never forget it."

" -Alright"

With a light nod, Ren called out the fire spirits. Promptly answering to the Enjutsushi's will, the fire spirits came together in a boisterous dance of light. And then -

"…W…ow…"

The light shining in the sky rained like drops of water above ground. Like snow, lightly flickering in the wind, the golden drops descended in a dance.

Holding no temperature, the clusters of pure light, upon touching the sandy beach and the surface of the sea, burst open and disappeared like in a dream.

"Ah- "

The last descending drop, Ayumi caught it extending both her hands. The moment it touched her hand, the light fleetingly disappeared but the girl softly

closed her hands and touched her chest. That irreplaceable something stored in her hands was tucked away inside her chest.

Dropping the curtain on the light's dance performance, affecting acting, Ren made a bow.

"Did it please you?"

"Yes - yes…"

Her eyes full of tears, Ayumi bowed many, many times over.

"I… I am glad that I am alive. Meeting Ren… Seeing something so beautiful, I…I…from the bottom of my heart…"



Unable to bear it in the end, her tears escaped. Shed for the first time in her life, tears of happiness.

In order to wipe the sobbing girl's tears, handkerchief in hand, he touched her face. Both their shadows brought forth by the moonlight, slowly became one.

But - this moment was the concluding moment of their honeymoon. On their cuddled silhouettes a violent, intense light shined.

" -!?"

Turning around holding hands, an eternally domineering voice pierced their ears.

"That's right! I'm so happy for you! That means you have no more regrets in this world, right?"

In front of both of them, watching over in a daze, the woman with the light on her back laughed.

Part 3

The pursuer from the Tsuwabuki!

In an instant Ren saw through the shadow's true character. Or perhaps I should say, as far as Ren knew, it was the only opponent pursuing them.

Drawing Ayumi back and stepping forward with a sleepwalking like gait, Ren probed into the other party's attitude. Overlooking them for a brief period from a higher place, the woman descended the stairs and continued walking towards the beach in a composed manner.

One man, like a servant, followed her, leaving between them several steps.

Because of the back lighting he saw only outlines but even from those shadows it was impossible not to recognize the proud atmosphere drifting around the woman. The glance overlooking them was more suited for stray dogs than humans.

Leaving a distance of five meters between them, the woman faced Ren and Ayumi.

As one would expect, approaching so much, it was now possible to discriminate her looks. Closing his

eyes partly, Ren observed the woman - and several seconds afterwards he opened his eyes wide in shock.

"Eh - ?"

The woman was younger than he thought. Probably not yet of age, in the second half of her teens. But that wasn't what Ren was surprised about.

-They looked alike.

Ren thought so, watching intently, in succession, Ayumi and the woman. No, they didn't resemble each other. If the age difference could be removed, their facial features would be perfectly the same.

Twins separated by age - those sort of contradicting words passed through Ren's head.

"Mayumi-sama…" Ayumi murmured, looking at that woman with a glance mixed with panic.

Unintentionally, Ren asked:

"Your elder sister?"

If that is the case, she too can…

The thought that instantly came to his mind, Ren denied it confused. Ayumi does not wish for such a thing.

-If you speak filthy words, your heart will become filthy too -

Good grief, I need to be more careful.

Agreeing to Ayumi's words reverberating in his head, he grasped her hand tenderly. Ayumi's face stiff from fear, still displayed a gallant smile.

"Elder sister?"

On the other hand, for the boy and the girl happy by themselves, the woman - Mayumi matched it with the height of displeasure.

"Elder sister, you said?"

Glaring at Ren as if he was her archenemy, she squeezed out a stifled to death voice from the gap between her clenched teeth. Her well regulated, elegant features, changed into the face of a demonic warrior.

"Don't mess around with me."

Mayumi's angry roar shrunk Ayumi's body with a start. After staring with much discord at the frightened girl, she turned an identical glance at Ren.

"It was enough taking Ayumi and running away without understanding the circumstance and this already foolish show, I believed you were someone lacking prudence but, never to this extent. Me and that thing sisters? It's the first time I was insulted so."

"…"

It seems Ayumi didn't receive human treatment even from her relatives. Holding down the rising anger, Ren searched for presence in the surroundings. It was unpleasant when Ayumi was called "that" again but Mayumi's words implied an imminent crisis.

Other people didn't come. Because what Mayumi evaluated as a foolish exhibition was already over, if such a flashy, abnormal phenomenon happened, it's impossible for none to approach. Normally, about now, a crowd would have gathered on the beach and the police and fire department would have surrounded the place.

None of it happened.

It's very likely that right now this area was blocked.

By the subordinates of the Tsuwabuki.

Can we escape?

Without thinking of handing Ayumi over, Ren investigated the possibility of escape. The fact that the girl in question accepted her own faith was totally forgotten.

"Why are you so cautious, young Kannagi prince?"

Seeing through Ren's decision promptly, Mayumi laughed, smiling sweetly.

"Everything is already over. There is nothing left for you to try."

Although using honorifics, speaking in a clearly despising tone, Mayumi focused on Ayumi.

"…"

Without even using words, Mayumi carelessly beckoned her as if calling her pet dog or something.

Ayumi started walking obediently.

"Ayumi-ch-"

"It's fine."

Ren's words, trying to call her to a halt, Ayumi interrupted them shortly and with a decisive voice.

"It's fine already. Thank you for everything until now. - It was very fun."

"Ayu- "

In order to shake of his extended hand, Ayumi turned her back on Ren. And with that, she never turned around.

Standing in front of Mayumi, Ayumi's body became stiff as if she turned to stone. Her glance swayed insecurely nearly Mayumi's feet. Suddenly Mayumi

stretched her fingers to Ayumi's chin and forcefully pointed upwards her face hanged in shame. Coercively looking down on the startled girl, she said in a voice full of smiles:

"If you wanted to run away, you should at least have crossed the ocean. Instead of that, seducing a man and flirting with him in this kind of place, - do you look down on us?"

The Chijutsushi manipulating the spirits of the earth can make searches on fairly long distances as long it's adjoining land. It goes without saying that if you know the target well that searching ability is further improved.

For the sake of running from Chijutsushi, by sea or by air - anyway the most important thing is to separate from the ground.

"I had…no intention…"

Staring at Ayumi, protesting in a trembling voice, with the look a carnivorous animal has before its feed, Mayumi let go of her jaw.

And then - she pulled her hand backwards and swung with all her strength.

" -Uh!"

It wasn't something as lovely as a slap. The punch made by hardening her wrist at the moment of the impact was a blow that made her bones resound.

Instantly Ayumi's legs separated from the ground and from the beginning exhausted body sunk into the sandy beach. Appearing to have completely fainted, her face half buried in the sand, she was completely still.

"Wha…"

Overcome with surprise at the sudden violence, Ren shouted white as a ghost.

"What have you done?"

But Mayumi didn't even look at Ren. As she already stated "your turn is already over" she disregarded his existence itself.

Instead, the man who followed behind her moved. With body movement that had no openings he stepped forward and got on his knee before Ayumi.

Decidedly, he did not attempt to nurse her. Grabbing hold of Ayumi by the hair, casually the man lifted her head as if he would uproot a radish.

"…E-eek…"

"What are you doing?"

Coldly looking down on Ayumi's feeble struggle, the man said in a monotonous tone.

"Do you think you can be lying down in front of the young lady, do you?"

"Yuu…ji…sama…"

"Silence!"

The man - Yuuji - abruptly became enraged.

"With that face, through that mouth, don't call out my name! How disgusting!"

Raising his hand, pulling her hair even more, he made Ayumi stand on her knees. And then - this time from the front, he slapped her face onto the sand. Forcibly making Ayumi take a prostrating position, Yuuji shouted.

"Apologize! Until your voice becomes hoarse, until your throat tears apologize! Did you understand in how much danger did you put the young lady? If we didn't find you in time what would have happened! Did you intend for the young lady to be a sacrifice in your place? You puppet doll!!"

That was the limit.

He thought he himself endured it really well. Surely, big brother would praise him for it. Or - he'll get angry for letting it get that far.

Quietly he held out his right hand and pointed his index finger at Yuuji. And then - without a moment of hesitation he released his power.

The thin, refined heat ray grazed Yuuji's cheek sticking into the concrete wall. The red hot concrete melted and the wall followed it, crashing.

"…What kind of behavior.." Yuuji questioned with a voice stiffed to death. However, like Mayumi did before, Ren completely disregarded that utterance.

It wasn't a provocation or something like that. It's just that in Ren's field of vision no one else but Ayumi was reflected. It was just that.

"Re…n…?"

For the girl weakly getting up, hearing that cracked voice, Ren painfully shook his head.

"As I thought, it's useless."

I can't control it.

I can't endure it. Anymore than this - I can't stand it.

"What is the right thing to do, I don't even know. However, to hand you over to these guys it's absolutely impossible."

Whether it's right or not, that's long past. His feelings denied that option.

"Fall back!"

Struck by that sharp voice, Ayumi reflexively kicked the ground. Slightly further away from Yuuji. In that gap Ren threw a fireball brought forth from the sky.

"-Tch!"

Visibly agitated by the blast, Yuuji and Mayumi jumped. The distance widened even more. Well in advance Ren wedged himself in the space separating the two "enemies" and Ayumi.

"Humph - in the end brute force, huh?"

Staring at Ren blocking his way to Ayumi, Yuuji laughed fearless.

"Ah, well. Just as planed."

"Shall I back you up?"

"It's not necessary."

Politely rejecting Mayumi's proposal, he casually took one step forward. With an attitude full of composure he looked down on Ren taking a battle stance.

"Publicly- "

Without particularly preparing in advance, just standing, Yuuji began to speak in a relaxed manner.

"Publicly, it seems there are many idiots who believe Enjutsushi the strongest but do you think so too?"

"-?"

Not understanding Yuuji's plan, Ren was perplexed. There is nothing to believe. The fact that Enjutsushi are the strongest is a <Reality> with no room for argument.

It's not about whether an Enjutsushi never lost to another kind of practitioner, of course there is no such thing. That is the power of one individual. It's about whether the ability difference can undermine the advantages and disadvantages of a technique style.

As for what technique system is the strongest - there is only one answer to that question. Without room for argument, with no chance for objection, the grave <Reality> doesn't change.

That is what Yuuji downright negated.

"What a foolish thing. All of you understand nothing about battle. The greatest offensive ability? When killing people do you think that is necessary?"

"What exactly?"

Including the confidence of certain victory in front of the perplexed Ren, Yuuji fired the question.

"You, where on earth do you plan to place your feet on?"

Unintentionally Ren stared at his own feet.There was nothing there but the ordinary sandy beach. There was no sign of set traps. There was no sense of discomfort when stepping on it, nothing but the feeling of soft sand-

-Sand?

"-Uh!!"

The sign of something wriggling, underneath his feet. Jumping by reflex, Ren's face became stiff with surprise and shivers.

Underground, and in addition to that, directly under his footprints a spear covered in sand was pushed up.

If his evasion would have been delayed by one second the spear would have stopped his foot by sewing it. It may be true he avoided the first attack but he had no room for relief. Visibly lying in wait at the spot Ren would come down, several spears sprung up.

"Kuu- "

Releasing fire and pointing it directly below, a countless number of spears burned to nothing. Coincident with his landing above the red hot sand, Ren rolled on the ground. Pursuing the rolling Ren from inside the sand, one after another, spears stick out.

While narrowly avoiding those, the boy cursed his overly optimistic thinking.

Shit, Chijutsushi - so that's the reason!

The spears hidden inside the sand were not something prepared in advance. Hardening the sand itself and changing its shape, Yuuji made those sharp spears.

Chijutsushi possess the force of the Earth Spirits. Sand, soil, ground stone and all materials affiliated with those, for them, are similar with extensions of their own hands. There was no need to expressly set traps.

The battleground itself was the Chijutsushi's weapon because that was for them the absolute most advantageous arrangement.

What to do?

Starting to see gaps one way or another, running in zig-zag to dodge the underground attacks, Ren looked for a breach. At any rate, as long as he is staying on the ground, his disadvantage can't be overcome.

Continuing to receive one-sided attacks without grasping a counter-attack clue, sooner or later he will receive a fatal blow.

On the other hand, Ren doesn't know such a jutsu that would allow him to gain a foothold on something else other than the ground.

If it were an Fuujutsushi, he could fly into the air.

A Suijutsushi could maybe stand on top of water.

However, Ren being an Enjutsushi - it may be possible for Jugo or Genma - he had no skill to stand on top of flames. As long as gravity comes into play, he had no choice but to place his feet on the ground.

What should I do?

Looking over his surroundings, he searched for a turn-around plan. The sandy beach was the worst as a

battle ground but concrete and asphalt must be similar. What remains -

Inside the sea?

It was out of the question. Ren being an Enjutsushi water was nothing more but a thing to be avoided. There was no point for Ren's power to be weakened beyond what Yuuji could accomplish.

To Ren, stuck in a defensive battle, Yuuji turned words of ridicule.

"What's the matter? Are you just going to run? I don't care how far you run but if you go to far I'll take Ayumi and go back home."

"Kuu- "

Because of Yuuji's carelessness, recognizing he became long separated from Ayumi, Ren grinds his teeth. If it goes like this, Ayumi will really be taken away.

What should I do? What should I -

The problem was that he had no technique to defend against the blows. He can use flames to cover the surroundings but the bottom of his feet are perfectly defenseless. When fighting against Chijutsushi, that became a lethal weakness. A foothold was necessary.

Separated from Yuuji's control, a scaffold made of <Earth> he cannot control.

He cannot fly into the sky. Water is also excluded. There's no wood near. He cannot stand on top of fire. On top of fire -

-Huh?

Suddenly Ren remembered the scene of a volcanic eruption he saw on TV. From craters, forcefully spitting out the red hot-

Shall I give it a try?

There was no time to spare. Making his resolve, Ren stopped and concentrated his consciousness.

"Aa…a…aa!!"

From Ren's whole body golden flames erupted. The dazzling glimmer blurred even the contours of his body and the boy shined, transformed into a small sun.

"Ua…unh, it's useless."

To encourage himself overpowered by the tremendous quantity of heat, Yuuji intentionally raised his voice.

"No matter how hot a flame you clad yourself in, you cannot defend against attacks from below."

Trying to make the reality that he was currently on offensive known, Yuuji was perplexed by the dull response from the spirits.

The spirits of the earth didn't respond to his will - No, something different obstructs the formation of sand spears.

"You…what did you do?"

He turns a glance full of suspicion towards Ren. No matter what an Enjutsushi tries to do, it's impossible to exercise a stronger influence towards sand than a Chijutsushi does.

Ren didn't answer. Unaffected, abandoning that body to the flames, he only stood rock still above the red ground.

"Red - ? I see, you- "

Yuuji stared at Ren's feet. What was there didn't have the rough characteristics of sand but was reflecting the flame like grass. Sometimes, from the bottom bubbles rose to the surface and burst open with a particular thick sound.

"You brat - you changed the burning sand to magma!"

"I gave it a try."

Receiving Yuuji's angry roar, Ren laughed triumphantly. It does not mean he had a positive proof. If a Suijutsushi can stand atop water he tried to stand atop magma, that could also be called fluid flame. He simply tried out that idea.

Although having a fluffy, undependable sense of touch, magma firmly sustained Ren's body weight. As there was no fist fight involved, the tenderness of the scaffold didn't matter. The radius was about two meters. Although modest,from the <Kingdom> underneath Yuuji's absolute control, Ren gained that much territory.

"D-don't be excited, boy!" barked Yuuji after loosing his advantage.

"Even for magma, it's <ground> attribute doesn't change. The situation is still the same!"

With an angry roar, including a severe determination, Yuuji ordered the ground spirits. Around Ren's surroundings magma unnaturally rose, molding red spearheads.

"Die, boy!!"

The spears lengthen trying to pierce Ren's body. But just before that - they stopped.

"W-whaaaaat!?"

Quietly gazing at the surprised Yuuji, Ren talked indifferent.

"Certainly magma is something that belongs to the <ground>. Still, half of it it's Enjutsushi possession. I'm not gonna hand it over so easily!"

The spear on the verge of touching his body, Ren casually flung it off. The hard sharp spear instantly lost her unity and returned with a small splash on the surface of the magma sea.

"Guu…Ba…"

With a really detestable howl, Yuuji stopped trying to proactively commence the next attack. It's understandable.

The control of the material called magma with attributes of both <ground> and <fire> has been snatched away. That means that in a contest of pure strength he was defeated by Ren. As the opponent of a higher ranked practitioner, he couldn't carelessly take the vanguard.

"Next is my turn, huh?" Ren declared with no fighting spirit.

His pushed out right hand accurately aimed at Yuuji. From that palm golden flames gushed out.

"Ooooooooooohh!!"

Yuuji too, didn't gave in. Hoisting the sand beneath his feet, he threw it onto the approaching flame. A surging sea of white sand attacking the golden torrent.

Receiving the aftermath of the struggle between these two powers, the ground grated and the sky trembled.

"Gu…me..uuuu…"

Through clenched teeth Yuuji let out a pressing moan. He understood that in a contest of strength he was inferior. As it is, he will certainly be pressed down.

While his body burned in humiliation, Yuuji changed his tactics to defense. The sand changed into a bulky bedrock and stood before the fire torrent. Although the bedrock stopped the flames there was no room for relaxation.

"It's coming from behind."

Inside the thunderous roar made by the flames burning the rock, for some reason that whisper clearly

reached his ears. Uneventfully changed to a quiet oath, Yuuji felt that enormous heat approaching from behind.

"Sh-shit!"

The already thin bedrock rose, splitting the sand and stopped a gigantic fire ball. Although withstanding it somehow, the tremendous impact crossed over the bed rock and mercilessly pummeled Yuuji's body.

In the space between the two bedrocks Yuuji was in anguish. And there, the last blow came.

"Next is up."

" -!?"

Looking up at the sky, Yuuji's eyes peeled in shock. A remarcably big fireball descended upon Yuuji like a meteor. The distance was less than two meters.

"Kuuu- !"

It's unthinkable of having time to defend and so forth. Overhead the man looking at it dumbfounded, the fireball violently exploded.

"…Uh!"

There wasn't much heat but the shock was hard to describe. The two sheets of bed rock made by him effi-

ciently reverberated, sinking Yuuji's body in the sandy beach.

"Go…bah…"

As if gravity was increased a hundred fold, the extremely heavy pressure flattened his body, the air in his lungs was squeezed out without exception and all the bones in his body creaked.

"Not…not yet…yet…"

Putting all his strength in his arms Yuuji seemed to want to push out the heavens. But after lifting it 10 centimeters the elbow joints made a thick sound and bent the other way.

When the broken right arm fell to the ground the shining fireball in the sky also vanished. But even so, Yuuji couldn't give up.

The sound of the broken bed rock resounded in vain, like the gong at the end of the match.

Part 4

"-Fuuu"

Taking a small breath, Ren shifted his attention to the remaining two.

Ayumi's gaze shaking with anxiety. And, despite having the same face, not showing even the smallest disturbance, expressing a thin smile, Mayumi:

Confronting Mayumi directly, Ren asked with a determined look.

"What will you do? Do you want to give it a try?"

While it may be true her outward appearance was that of a frail young lady, he won't act unprepared. Based on Yuuji's behavior it was clear Mayumi was the purest descendant. Not an opponent to make light of.

"Oh, the Kannagi young lord would go as far as to raise his hand against a non resisting woman?"

With no place for misunderstanding, Mayumi's expression was provocative. Even so, looking puzzled at the girl not showing any indication of battle, Ren retaliated in a low voice:

"-If you want to run away I won't pursue you."

"Well, thank you."

Replying to the lenient laugh with a scornful laugh Mayumi shed a fleeting glance.

"That's what he said Yuuji. What will you do?"

"-?"

Looking the same way Mayumi did, Ren unintentionally opened his eyes wide. Over there, Yuuji, beaten down enough to keep him immobilized for three months, was crawling out of sand, drawing near.

"…Ridiculous…"

It was impossible. From right overhead, from an angle he couldn't elude he received a strong bomb blast. He must have ten or twenty bone fractures and his internal organs were supposed to be damaged. Not the kind of injury you could move with because of fighting spirit and will power - that's the way it was supposed to be.

Mayumi loudly sneered at Ren in mute amazement.

"It seems you took lightly a Chijutsushi's resistance."

The high ranking Chijutsushi, by directly taking the ground's <ki> inside their body, are endowed with

a resistance that exceeds common sense. Ren too, also knew that but seeing it in practice was fairly ominous.

"B-but…"

While looking at Yuuji advancing by crawling, as if he was seeing a zombie, Ren shouted.

"He received so much damage! It's impossible to recover so much to try and fight immediately!"

"Is that so?"

As for Mayumi, she was thoroughly composed.

"Yuuji, were you not supposed to protect me at the cost of your own life? Do you plan to crawl out of there cowering to see me getting killed?"

The effect of those words was tremendous.

Enduring the pain, Yuuji stood up and although stumbling, began to walk on his own two feet. Step by step that unsteady manner of walking lost its disorder and by the time he stood up in front of Ren, blocking his way to Ayumi, with the exception of the smashed right arm, he seemed completely recovered.

"…I,will protect,my lady…"

With an unsightly smashed but firmly determined voice, Yuuji bravely declared.

"I will absolutely not let her, get killed…"

"I don't want to kill her!" Ren shouted while feeling, without knowing why, overawed by a dying, severely wounded person.

"If she wanted to go back she can go for all I care! I have no business with the lot of you. I just want to protect Ayumi-chan, that's all!"

Hearing Ren's claim, Yuuji unexpectedly starred in wonder. And then, he suddenly burst into laughter.

"Ku ku ku…Buahahahaha…ku ku ku ku ku…"

Although throwing up blood, Yuuji still laughed. His blood stained face was warped and extremely happy.

"I see…that's the way it is, huh?…"

"Wh-…what is so funny?…"

Ren suddenly shouted blushing with anger and Yuuji suddenly stopped his sneer.

"You don't understand anything. You're just a brat playing with the power passed through your body."

"What?"

"Just shut up already and go back home. Forget everything that happened today."

Those remarks almost like regarding an unreasonable child made Ren childishly exasperated.

"Don't joke around with me! I'm not gonna hand Ayumi-chan over to guys like- "

"So, do you say my lady should be the sacrifice instead?"

With a terribly cold expression, Yuuji retaliated.

Seeing Ren lost for words at the unexpected objection, almost like pressing for an answer, he continued.

"It's not like you don't know. Ayumi is the ritual sacrifice. It's a thing made for the sake of dying instead of my lady. If you protect it, it's equivalent with killing my lady."

"That sort of- I- "

"*I have no intention of doing that*, huh? The meaning of the act called protection is it the affectation of a knight who does not consider the weight of words, just entrusts to his power? That's why I said you are a brat who doesn't understand anything!!"

"Wro…"

Wrong - when trying to say that word, with all his heart Ren was at a loss for words. There was nothing to answer back.

"Listen, kid. The act of protection means obviously getting your hands dirty for something important. For

the sake of that one irreplaceable thing to be prepared to cut down everything else! Mere lip service changes nothing - saves nothing!"

A few hours ago, when Ren started speaking about making preparations for a substitute sacrifice, Ayumi gently rebuked him.

-If you speak dirty words, your heart will become dirty too-

They were beautiful words. If anyone heard these words after knowing Ayumi's situation, they would have been deeply moved.

But, Ayumi will die. Without leaving anything behind except that deep emotion, she will disappear from this world.

-To die in such a beautiful way or to survive in an ugly way -

Which was correct, Ren was not able to judge. On the other hand, Yuuji did not hesitate.

"For the sake of protecting my lady, I will kill Ayumi. Those that will get in the way, I will kill them all! I will remove all obstacles even at the cost of my life and protect my lady!"

DETERMINATION

Crossing over the judgement of right and wrong, good and evil, Yuuji selected the protection of that "one thing" that must be protected. To stop him it seems there is no choice but to kill him.

But, right now Ren had no will to go through with it to that extent. No, even if he had that determination, he lost sight to whom it should be pointed to.

What should be done? -What should I do?

Ren was perplexed.

But before the boy found the answer, the situation changed.

"…Kyaa…"

Swept by the wind, a disappearing small shriek. But even so, it was impossible for Ren to miss that voice. Because that was no one else's but Ayumi's voice.

"Ayumi-chan!?"



In front of Ren's eyes,turning around with a changed expression, were reflected the figures of Ayumi and Mayumi, standing behind her. Embraced closely from behind, Ayumi's pale complexion became stiff.

Although not being strangled or press against a dangerous weapon, panic grabbed hold of her heart.

"-My lady…"

When Yuuji called out to her, Mayumi's lips became sharp with dissatisfaction.

"What, are you telling me not to get involved? Aren't you at fault for being inefficient?"

"No, I'm sorry for causing you trouble."

" -Humpf! Good grief. I'll be troubled if you can't be more reliable!"

This time she held her head high, self-important. She seemed to have a pretty simple personality.

"At any rate- "

While embracing Ayumi, Mayumi shifted her focus on Ren.

"Loving such a doll as this, the Kannagi young lord too, must have some unusual hobbies."

"Ayumi-chan is not a doll! She's human!"

"-Hey, hey…"

At Ren's shout, Mayumi displayed a studied surprise and looked down on Ayumi:

"You said nothing, did you? -What a bad child."

Suddenly thinking of something, Mayumi gently stroked Ayumi's cheek and her body tightly shrunk. That face, smiling complacently, gave the impression of a cat considering how to tease the mouse pinned down by its forelimbs.

A cruel smile lifting her lips, Mayumi said:

"Do you listen, Kannagi young lord? The *Ayumi-chan* you tried so hard to protect is not human."

"W- what are you say-"

"It's the truth. Because, you see, this is a clone made by cultivating my cells."

" -!?"

Ren opened his eyes wide with surprise. But simultaneously, he felt somewhere in his heart it was true.

Mayumi and Ayumi - even assuming they were sisters, those two resembled too much.

Thing Doll Sacrifice - completely spoken ill of, a girl whose human dignity was trampled underfoot.

If it was just as Mayumi said, if Ayumi was not human and was created for the sake of dying as a sacrifice, doesn't everything makes sense?

"A lie…It's a lie."

Aiming a smile full of spite at the dumbfounded Ren, Mayumi continued.

"Her appearance may seem that of a twelve years old girl but in reality only a month passed since its creation. Even her planted memories have been suitably edited from my own. That kind of crude doll, you tried to protect with your knight affectation. *That was fun ~!*."

"It…It's a lie…"

"Let me tell you one more thing. Even if she doesn't become the sacrifice, just a month from now on, her life span will be cut from inside. Made with no intention to use for an extended period of time, just instant makeshift goods."

"That's, a lie…"

Ren looked at Ayumi almost like searching for help. She received his glance for just one second and sadly cast her eyes down.

Thus, at last Ayumi - Ayumi told the truth.

"…It's true. I am the katashiro doll[1] made for the sake of keeping Mayumi-sama alive. Mayumi-sama's impostor."

Where is the genuine **Ayumi**?

I have no memories - Ayumi told Ren so. That's natural. If she had been made just a month before, it's impossible for those to exist. Without even trying to steal it, there was nothing there form the beginning. Everything was an imitation. If only her heart was more than a transient object, his own act of protecting Ayumi, his determination, everything would not have been a wasted effort.

"I look, so stupid…"

His body was full with a sense of helplessness. Feebly hanging his head, Ren collapsed on the sandy beach.

"It looks like that was a lot of shock, huh?"

Coldly looking down on the defeated Ren, Mayumi sneered.

"That's only natural. It made him realize his own buffoonery can't go any higher."

"Well, isn't that fine? By understanding reality, the boy becomes an adult."

"…you could say that."

Yuuji replied to Mayumi's words, pretending to act like a grown-up, in a quiet voice. Maybe because they were both men, but it was impossible not to feel sympathy for Ren.

"Come now, let's go home. We must quickly return and prepare for the ceremony."

On the other hand, Mayumi didn't have such a compassionate heart. Already disregarding Ren's existence, she starts thinking about tomorrow's ceremony.

"…yes", Yuuji respectfully bowed.

Receiving Ayumi, presented to him like luggage, the same way as they came, he followed Mayumi like a servant.

But, at the same time he placed his leg on the stairs connected to the main road-

"Step aside!"

From the vicinity of the main road that command reverberated, and a second later a golden pillar of fire lit the sky.

Involuntarily the three people turned around to Ren. But, he did not seemed to notice the present disturbance and was kneeling on the sandy beach, his head hanged. Hearing footsteps they turned in the direction of the main road once more. Two sets of footsteps. Both of them light. They were probably women.

Around that time, Yuuji made a guess about the opponent's identity. Noticing he should be in front, he tried to make Mayumi step back, but- it was slightly late.

"Ren!"

On top the stairs, one girl appeared.

Pushing out the darkness, the aura of red and gold shining out far and wide. The enormous amount of fire spirits that followed her in the background were displaying the girl as the human model of the flame itself.

"This is also…"

From Yuuji's mouth a mutter of unexpected wonder leaked out. Certainly her age was sixteen. And although childish, the shape of the young lady captivated him.

Overflowing from that small body, the surge of an overwhelming power. That sword was not yet drawn out but even so, it was impossible to misread the girl's identity.

Beautiful-

He genuinely thought so. That was not in regard for the human, much less the opposite sex but the same deep emotion he felt at the time he looked at Mother Nature's magnificent scenery.

Suddenly, he noticed a sharp glance. Calmly looking away and folding her arms, Mayumi's half opened glare met his eye.

"*This is also…*" with a monotonous voice Mayumi repeated Yuuji's words.

"What is the meaning of *This is also…* Yuuji?"

"Ah, no, that is…"

While becoming completely confused, Yuuji desperately searched for explanatory words.

If he cannot talk his way out of it now, it will become fairly difficult afterwards.

"That, didn't have any significant meaning. This is also…flashy…?"

"-Humph, that so?"

With that considerably packed expression Mayumi nodded.

"Well, afterwards I'll receive a lengthy explanation of that matter. Now it's not the time for it."

Mayumi faced the two standing at the top of the stairs.

"Nice meeting you, Kannagi princess. Being able to meet you is an honor."

"…and you are?"

The girl - Ayano, shortly inquired.

"I was slow in saying. I am Tsuwabuki Mayumi. This is my attendant Yuuji. Although belonging to a collateral family, for the time being permit him to call himself with the Tsuwabuki surname."

"If I say I will, I wonder will I have to call you by such an embarrassing name as *Tsuwabuki princess*?"

"I am at your mercy."

To Ayano's provocative response, Mayumi bowed her head with a smiling face.

Irritated, Ayano ended this conversation lacking sincerity and got to the main question.

"I have no particular business with you. Where is Ren?"

Mayumi pointed at the sandy beach in the back.

"Somewhere in that area. Maybe he is crying holding his knees."

"What, have you done to him?"

The atmosphere became noisy. The explosive scarlet aura flickered like a flame.

"Physically, nothing. He did not receive a single wound."

"…haa"

When that report was made, Yuuji looked sullen.

"But it seems his emotional scars are quite deep. We would be troubled if you complained to us about such things. About the details, you can ask that boy. However, I believe not prying into it would be a kindness to him."

Just saying that, with no precaution Mayumi started walking up the stairs. Whipping his wounded body, Yuuji went in front of Mayumi, trying to be a shield as much as possible.

"Well then-"

Greeting her while passing by one another, Mayumi walked near Ayano's side. And then, after looking at the retreating figure running down the stairs not

returning the favor, she shifted her focus on the other person - a woman standing in a somewhat separated place.

"Good evening. It's been a long time, Police Superintendent Tachibana."

"We haven't talked in a long time, Mayumi-san."

That perfectly ordinary greeting, the detective in charge of Tokyo MPD's Special Investigation Unit, Police Superintended Tachibana returned with an absolutely tranquil tone.

"Because you didn't appear together with the that young woman, can we assume you have no intention of opposing the Tsuwabuki regarding the Kannagi matter?"

"Of course. We have no intention of interfering in any kind of dispute. Naturally, if you would accept our mediation, we would fill that position with pleasure."

"That won't be necessary."

The faint tension that dwelt in Kirika's words, smiling, Mayumi severed it when she replied.

"Everything has been already settled. We have regained the object Kannagi Ren stole and because it's

something a child did, we have no intention of blaming the Kannagi Clan for that error. If you would be so good as to pass it along to Ayano-san."

"…I will comply."

"Thank you."

Bowing her head to Kirika, Mayumi left accompanied by her attendant and the spoils of war.

No matter how polite her tone was, the girl's attitude was that of a victor who obtained everything.

Gazing for a brief period at the retreating figure, never looking back, Kirika started walking towards the defeated boy or maybe the defeated people.

"There's no sign this is ending here."

That's what she was thinking.

Chapter 4: Each And Everyone's Determination

Part 1

"…!"

"Fugyaa!?"

Kazuma, peacefully breathing in his sleep on the upper side of the tree, suddenly - avoiding Tiana's wings, who just happened to fly on top of him - jumped to his feet.

"W- what?"

On the verge of falling, reorganizing her attitude, Tiana groaned. Completely ignoring those complaints, Kazuma said:

"It came back."

"…really?"

Tiana forgot her resentment on the spot. While it may be true she felt it, it does not mean she can do something about it.

"Where, where?"

To the now rushing out fairy, Kazuma jerked his jaw, pointing to the car trying to pass through the gate. Both their glances have been rooted on the spot.

From the car stopped in front of the entrance, several men and women made their appearance. Among those people, from inside the body of one small girl at the beginning of her teens, the wave motion felt from the center of her chest was, without a doubt, belonging to the treasure stolen from the fairy village.

"Even so, that is…"

The girl emitted an awfully unnatural presence. And then, when comparing her with the girl with an identical face, five or six years her senior, Kazuma muttered in a bitter voice.

He grasped the family structure of the Tsuwabuki head house. A girl that was not supposed to exist and an older identical girl.

And then - the fairy's treasure carried inside her body. From his perspective everything was clear.

"What a vulgar copy cat…"

On the other hand, Tiana was unrelated to those strong feelings.

"Ah, I found it…"

Murmuring with a voice overcome with emotion, both hands before her chest, looking up at the Heaven with wet pupils, as if saying "Thank you, God".

"Inside that, it's inside that! Come now - Kazuma please carry out the request! Gouge that girl's heart and retrieve the bloody treasureeee!!"

Because of too much excitement, Tiana screamed the bloody speech. How to say this, it was a scene meant to break any dreams and aspiration regarding the so called fairies.

That Tiana, shouting with blood shot eyes, Kazuma lightly disregarded, as if it was a matter of course. Brushing off the leaves and bark sticking to his clothes, he lightly muttered one thing.

"Well then, should I go back to sleep?"

"Just wait a secooooooooond!"

Tiana pulled with all her might the nape of Kazuma's neck, trying to descend from the tree that was their kip. Casually grabbing the fairy's body, following about, and plucking it of, he asked tiresomely.

"What?"

"It's not *what*, right? The treasure we searched for it's just there!? Quickly get it baaack!!"

"Tiana"

Kazuma called out the fairy with the propensity for derangement in a terribly quiet voice.

As if cold water was poured on her heated head, Tiana promptly returned to her true character.

"W- wh- what is it…?"

"If you think about it, the ceremony is tomorrow night."

"So?"

"Instead of taking it now, won't it be more amusing to take it when they will be relived and think the ceremony can quietly take place? When knocked down from the peak of rejoice to the bottom of despair, what kind of expression will they do?…ku ku ku…"

Engraved on the contractor's mouth was an inhuman, cruel and brutal smile. The man's true character, who essentially should be a saint, made Tiana feel despair countless times.

"Auuuuuuuu…"

Part 2

She saw a dream.

Of a distant past, of a time her chest still harbored hope, a resemblance of the once foolish self. She wanted to be appreciated. She wanted to be smiled at. It did not matter if she was number one. It did not matter if she was the second.

That's why she desperately struggled. Putting her life on the line, piling up experience, refining her power. Without considering that it was the cause of still more alienation.

"That technique is a heresy. It's not appropriate for a practitioner of the traditional Tsuwabuki."

"That thing is not Chijutsushi. Why does my child have to use such black arts?"

Disgrace

Demon Child

Evil magician

The cruel words thrown at the very young girl by her own father carved in her heart wounds that cannot heal.

"Someday, for sure…"

Realizing that was a wish that will never come true, when did that happen?

That was a crab.

Not something particularly scary. Its size was somewhat big - enough to bisect a bear with its kitchen-like pincers. Its legs were somewhat numerous - the fore pincers - but, if she were to use her power the opponent would have no choice but to be lightly pinched out.

Despite this - the girl she was supposed to protect, was being overpowered by such a thing and paralyzed with horror. The huge pincers swung from overhead, was being looked up at, in a daze, by that inexperienced face.

"…Mayumi!"

She promptly released her power. The pincer trying to smash Mayumi's head was broken as if crushed by a giant hand.

"Come here!"

The crab was spouting froth from anguish. She sharply ordered Mayumi, who was still looking up at it in blank amazement.

"…Y-yes!"

Finally calming down, Mayumi rushed over while her legs got twisted. She payed absolutely no attention behind her. To that defenseless back, the crab tried to give a retribution blow. While driving out the crab with a feint attack, she caught the small body leaping in her chest.

"Older sister!"

For the girl trembling in fear, she showed a perfectly forced smile.

"It's alright. Against that kind of apparition, it's impossible for you to loose."

"B-but…"

"I will stop its movement and I will give it the finishing blow. That's fine, right?"

"…"

"Make your preparation."

Turning around Mayumi's still insecure body, she was made to confront the imminent crab.

"It's alright."

Embracing from behind the younger sister stiff with fear, she tenderly whispered. Contrary to her tone, that facial expression was cold but invisible to the girl gazing at the crab.

"Look…observe it."

Kicking the ground with eight long legs the crab approached the two straightforward. And, when he was approximately ten meters away, suddenly the crab was smashed.

It was like from right overhead, an unbelievably huge palm held him down with all his strength. Smashing the collection of legs, the shell conspicuously fissured. Plucking from the root the pincers that were rose overhead, admitting defeat, it was buried into the ground with a roar.

Without moving at all she pointed at the crab in anguish and told Mayumi:

"Come now, finish it off. Make a hole through the center, pierce it from bellow. You can do it, right?"

"Y-yes" Mayumi obediently nodded.

Obeyed by the spirits of the earth, she governed their power. The spirits promptly responded to the most powerful Chijutsushi blood.

" -ya!!"

Together with the girl's cute yell, from beneath the crab a spear stone grew. That long and narrow cone shape penetrated the crab's shell and rose facing the heavens. Making a huge hole in the middle of its body, the crab wriggled, foam at it's mouth. But by construction the crab was unable to escape from the stone spear. It's resistance gradually weakened and gradually stopped.

Before their eyes, the skull of the reddish crab lost its gloss, growing dull in color. The crack spread from that gap and the muscle became visible. It faded the same way loosing its elasticity and the muscle became stiff.

It turned to stone.

That was Mayumi's real aim. The stone spear that went through was no more than the preliminary arrangement for that purpose. The ground spirits pumped into the wounds changed with great vigor the organic matter in inorganic one. Making sure the petrification reached the interior of the body, including fighting spirit, Mayumi shouted.

"Smash!!"

It was impossible to disobey it. Agreeing to the command, the ground spirits speedily dissolved the bindings. Making a thick sound the stone crab was smashed.

Because the body changed to countless stones it was no longer possible to guess its original shape.

"Very well done Mayumi-sama!"

"Merely eight years old and to be able to take down such a Youma!"

Waiting for Mayumi when she returned home was a storm of praise from the entire family. The people assembled in the saloon unanimously praised Mayumi and her alone.

There was nobody who talked to her. Without showing any reaction for the uproar of the surroundings, she was sitting diagonally behind Mayumi, mute like a puppet. In front of her ignored as if her existence was the same as air, Mayumi who was given the family seat of honor was being spoken to by the Tsuwabuki Iwao.

"You did very well, Mayumi."

"Father!"

Mayumi's smiling face lit up and jumped into her father's chest, whom she respected and loved. Iwao also embraced his daughter closely, including an overflowing love.

"You did very well, Mayumi."

While pressing her cheeks against against Iwao's chest, who repeated those words again, Mayumi said innocently:

"Yeah, I did my best. But older sister practically did it by herself. Older sister is awfully strong!"

The unreserved large voice reverberated in the saloon, and the faces of the people sitting in a row became pale. Feeling the change of atmosphere, Mayumi raised her eyes to her father in wonder.

"What's wrong?"

Iwao replied laughingly.

"It's of no concern. Mayumi is admirable, dividing her achievement with other people."

"That's wrong, really, elder sister is- "

"It's fine, I don't give a damn about that thing."

Blocking Mayumi's field of vision by hugging her close, Iwao shifted his attention to her. Cold like a

different person, a glance exceeding hatred, filled with curses.

But even so, she didn't move one finger, one eyebrow or one muscle. Ignoring the glance sticking between her eyebrows, her gaze looked at nothing but in front, one meter horizontal from Iwao, fixating on the wood details of the alcove post.

The sister embraced with love and the sister glared at with hatred.

All present looked at the excessively contrastive sisters, catching their breath.

"Kureha-sama…Kureha-sama?"

"…!"

At the voice repeating her name, taken aback, Kureha woke up. It seems she took a nap in the middle of her duties. Lightly shaking off her head, to remove the remaining sleepiness, she responded.

"Enter"

From the door opened by the maid, a group of three people got in. By priority of age, Yuuji, Mayumi and - Ayumi.

That was unexpectedly fast.

Kureha thought so, looking at the puppet with eyes sunk in bitterness. As far as she saw of that facial expression, her first trip had not been particularly enjoyable.

Well, it's a thing of no consequence.

"Following your instruction Ayumi has been returned home."

Being considerably pathetic, Yuuji reported stiffly. Expressly speaking of such obvious things, Yuuji may have been foolish but that doesn't mean Kureha was the same.

That was some kind of indication of his decision.

"With this I won't allow Mayumi to become a sacrifice", or something

It's not like her real intentions stood out. Instead, feeling that naivete pleasant, Kureha responded with a sweet smile.

"I appreciate your efforts."

"Y-yes!"

No matter how he perceived those words of appreciation Yuuji made a respectful bow, his face lit up.

But before he raised his head, Kureha informed the three.

"Yuuji, you can already retire. Mayumi and Ayumi, please follow me."

"…Eh?" unintentionally Mayumi asked back.

Yuuji stiffed in a comical stance, his back bent.

"…Me too, you said?"

Seeing surprise and a small quantity of fear clung to Mayumi's question, Kureha laughed.

"That's right. Did you think you will be sightseeing the ceremony drinking tea? You too have an important part. Follow me."

"…"

Iwao being on the sickbed at the present time, Kureha was the one commanding the family. She could not advocate her objection.

Complying with Kureha, who naturally opened the door and stated walking, Mayumi and Ayumi followed behind.

Yuuji followed the three people until they left the office but clinging to them further was not permitted.

For him, unable to do anything but see them off, Mayumi looked over her shoulder just once.

That profile full of anxiety was scorched in the center of his consciousnesses together with a feeling of loss that cannot be undone.

Part 3

The next morning

Hiding his pathetic decision inside his heart, Yuuji knocked on the door leading to Kureha's private room. Without pause, the reply came.

"What's the matter, Yuuji?"

"…I have something to discuss."

"Enter."

The knob turned. It wasn't the work of a key. In a mental state similar to that of entering a dragon's den, Yuuji stepped inside the room.

"Good morning. You're early Yuuji."

Although saying that Kureha's appearance too was perfectly in order. Her flowing black hair was perfectly arranged and the same as usual a black suit was tightly wrapped around her.

"Will you let me know my lady's whereabouts?"

Standing before Kureha, impolitely Yuuji did not return the greeting and got to the main question. His complexion was bad. In spite of being injured to that extent yesterday it seems he didn't sleep a wink.

"Since last night, after Kureha-sama took her along, she did not return to her room."

"You, did you stick yourself in front of Mayumi's room? You're almost like a stalker, huh?", Kureha laughed sarcastically.

However, Yuuji, without showing a glimpse of insincere smile, draw near with a severe face.

"Please answer, Kureha-sama. Depending on what happens, even if it's you…"

Kureha indifferently asked back.

"Even if it's you?"

"Ku…"

Without doing anything, just by standing there, Kureha overwhelmed Yuuji.

Even by making use of his blind devotion towards Mayumi, he could not fill the desperate power difference.

"My lady, where is she…"

Still, seeing Yuuji hang on, mustering his willpower Kureha showed a somewhat unnatural look of admiration.

"What considerable devotion. If you want to meet her that badly, I will allow you to. Come!"

Yuuji chased after Kureha, who left the room and began to walk a few meters behind. The distance he put between them, rather than him being precautious, it was more like he was afraid of getting closer.

What kind of person is this woman?

Even if it was for a moment, when he confronted her he felt her abnormality. That power was clearly on a different level, when compared with other practitioners. Even Iwao, the Head, for Kureha, he was not a match by far. To say it simply it was an excessively mighty power. From the time she was a child, although unique, she was recognized as a powerful practitioner but nobody expected her to rise above to such a level.

"What are you doing? You'll be left behind."

Almost like reading his heart, indulging himself in speculation, Kureha suddenly looked over her shoulder.

Bearing the shriek trying to gush out by clenching his teeth, Yuuji shortly answered.

"…I understand."

"Hurry up. I don't want to be seen by too many people."

And with these words, her beautiful face showed her usual smile, with no trace of impatience.

Glaring annoyed at Kureha, who faced forward once again Yuuji slightly quickened his pace.

In silence, Kureha walked to the deepest part of the grounds. Yuuji never entered this place before- it was a place nobody could enter with the exception of those who earned the permission of the Head.

"This is…"

"You've never entered this place before, huh? It's because, with the exception of those belonging to the main family this is a place that doesn't open but once every thirty years."

At the words he feared, Yuuji's face became stiff.

"Kureha-sama, you, by no means, even my lady- "

Those words, spoken in a strong tone, Kureha interrupted icily.

"Yuuji, you may believe you are given permission to an opinion but I have no intention of bestowing it any further. I am letting you meet her in deference to your loyalty but I have no intention of releasing Mayumi until the ceremony is over. Remember it."

"…"

Completely forbidden from raising objections, Yuuji had no choice but to be silent.

"…is this the place?"

Staring at the small shrine they arrived before long, Yuuji asked.

"This is the entrance. Our place of destination is inside it" answered Kureha, opening the small shrine's gate.

Inside there wasn't even a single light, and without having performed any kind of process the cave entrance lightly opened its mouth.

"Here is…"

"Correct, this is the sacred ground of Tsuwabuki. The place we must protect even at the cost of our lives. Well, shall we go forward? Your beloved lady is inside."

"I understand."

To Kureha's exaggerated words, mixed with ridicule, Yuuji replied seriously.

He continued walking while controlling his uneasiness at the endlessly continuing cave.

A pitch blackness without a ray of light. A natural cave with no reinforcements. This was a situation that

would have driven claustrophobic people to madness but for a Chijutsushi it was a place full of tranquility equivalent with the inside of mother's womb.

And yet, Yuuji frantically endured the urge to start running. In what sort environment was Mayumi placed, thinking of that he is unable to suppress his anxiety.

My lady…I will, definitely…

Hiding that strong decision n his heart, he is descending in the cave. And then -

"…uh!?"

A dazzling glint burned Yuuji's eyes. Into his ears, unintentionally shutting his eyes, Kureha's composed voice resounds.

"Welcome to the center of Tsuwabuki's consecrated ground."

"Wh…at?"

Holding his hands before his eyes, Yuuji slowly opened his eyelids. What was there was a huge space that did not appear to be underground, spreading out.

"This is…"

A voice full of wonder leaked out. The magical spectacle spreading before hos eyes, drew in his sight

and didn't let go. The gigantic pillar soaring at the center of the large hollow spreading a hundred meters below Fuji's sea of trees, is brilliantly shining.

"Crystal?…"

The sparkling, transparent stone pillar - there is no mistake about it, it was a pillar made of high purity crystal. The diameter roughly four meters, it's height nearly twenty meters.

And then, even supposing this crystal was guiding the sunshine so deeply underground, that enormousness exhausted any kind of description.

To Yuuji, stupefied with amazement, Kureha turned an evil smile.

"Yuuji, it's fine to be so deeply moved but is it not something else you should look for?"

"…eh?"

"Please look carefully inside the pillar."

"…"

Doing as he was told, Yuuji closely observed the pillar. Enduring the radiance, he saw a dark stain somewhat lower than the center.

He supposed that was just some foreign matter that was mixed in, but that unusual shape weighted on

his mind. Taking a few steps forward he stared even more.

"…eh?"

He was terrified. That stain had the form of a human.

Dressed sparingly, the white, thin dress showing her shoulders, the girl's eyes were peacefully closed. It was unthinkable not to recognize her.

Because she was the girl he pledged to protect by sacrificing everything.

"My lady!"

On Yuuji's shoulder, who started running, an invisible power was placed.

The heavy pressure reaching one ton sealed his body's movements as if it was its loyal subject.

"Calm down!" coldly informed Kureha.

Yuuji glared at her.

"What have you done to my lady?"

That shout, so overcome with emotion it forgot even honorifics, Kureha tolerantly pardoned.

"I did say Mayumi too has her own role."

"Role…?"

"Ayumi's body cannot withstand the release of power. The emission ratio will not be enough for the final tuning. Therefore, the power Ayumi cannot sustain by herself, I made Mayumi shoulder. You could call it the unexpected side effect of a clone."

The practitioner who performs the ritual, even calling it extreme, one is enough. Or perhaps it should be said that for the delicate control required by the technique, the governing intent must only be one.

Excluding the early few times, the ceremony was practiced by almost all the family, adding multiplied force for the sake of raising the success rate but did not change the fact that the practitioner controlling the power that is the focal point is just one.

But, if it's Ayumi and Mayumi practically identical at the genetic level, it may not be impossible to align their consciousness. Particularly by making the weak-self Ayumi do the main part and leaving the trance to the egoistic Mayumi.

"Such a…"

Without listening to Kureha's explanation until the end, Yuuji dropped to his knees, heartbroken.

I…until now, for what sake…

That appearance, feebly hanging his head, resembled Ren's the night before, in a cruel way.

If Yuuji could see himself through an objective point of view perhaps a cynical smile would be irrepressible.

"Relax. Because she probably won't die."

"…eh?"

But, Kureha did not permit even despair. In front of the stricken Yuuji, she suspended an ostentatious thread of salvation.

"In the end, Ayumi is the main one and Mayumi is the spare. Because she is supplementing Ayumi's insufficiency, I don't think it will be fatal - that is, as long as the seal does not break even for an instant."

Reinforcing a seal that already has shape and rebuilding from scratch a seal that burst open without leaving any trace, between the power required by the two, there is a world of difference.

If that sort of abnormal situation does not occur Mayumi will survive, it was said, but for some reason, Yuuji could not relax.

"Do you think there is a possibility it will happen?"

At Yuuji's cautious question, Kureha responded without hesitation.

"At least, there will certainly be interference."

"…the Kannagi kid will come again?"

Nothing else came to his mind but Kureha opened her eyes wide as if she was surprised and let out a small sarcastic laugh.

"Ah, do you mean Kannagi Ren? I received the report. But, I am concerned about the fairies."

"The fairies? What can those insubstantial living things do?"

Deepening her sarcastic smile toward Yuuji's bewildered face, Kureha continued.

"Did you not hear? Your head if filled with nothing but Mayumi, huh? Yesterday, a fairy and it's guardian got inside the house."

"A-ah…" Yuuji nodded vaguely.

Come to think of it, someone said that. According to Kureha's pointing out, he had no composure to think about something else, vaguely ignoring it.

"The guardian?"

"A terrifyingly strong man making use of the wind. He seemed human but - I wonder about that. He said he is the fairy's brethren too"

"Wind, is it?"

Frowning id doubt, Yuuji asked in return.

"Why, if its only the likes of Fuujutsushi should we be afraid?"

"If it's only- ?"

Stuck by Yuuji's words, Kureha giggled in a very improper way.

"You're right, if it's only Fuujutsushi. If it's just that kind of practitioner able to defeat the power of the likes of me, perhaps someone like you has no need to be afraid."

"…!!"

"So reliable"

Yuuji asked the sneering Kureha in a hoarse voice:

"Is - is that true…? Truly, with just wind, your power - ?"

"It's the truth. What's more, I've been seen through after the first attack. To be ahead of me to that extent, that was a first. The world is really big, huh?"

"…"

At a loss of words, Yuuji stood rock still in blank amazement.

A Fuujutsushi surpassing Kureha - if such a thing were to appear, for him it's impossible to oppose no matter how he were to struggle.

"B-but…if he obstructs the ceremony, Mt. Fuji will definitely erupt. Will he go that far?"

"I don't know about the Kannagi's side but the fairies have no reason to hesitate. Because the eruption is nothing more than a natural phenomenon they have no intention of resisting it."

Talking about such a hopeless story with a gossip-like tone, Kureha looked at Yuuji's face, dyed in despair.

"So, we can't talk about it, but… how about you? Don't you desire power?"

"…eh?"

"Power. A mighty power. To drive away all enemies, to protect your precious one, overflowing power. If I were to say I can grant you that power - you, what will you do?"

"…"

Yuuji looked hard at Kureha with a bottomless shiver. As a practitioner, Yuuji recognized the fact that she was in a by far superior rank - No, he was supposed to know that.

But it was different. This, it was not that kind of thing.

This woman - is she really human?

Feeding on his hope, something that tempts humans to their ruin. The existence passed down on tradition on every culture around the world, right now, is sneering before his eyes. The spoils it aims at are waiting the time of the fall

Even so -

Do I mind?

As far as Yuuji is concerned, he had no other option. No, his choice was already made.

If the compensation of power is required, he would give anything, no matter what it is.

His life, his soul, he had no choice but to consider them second or less.

That's why his answer had beed decided.

"No matter what will happen, I don't care. Please give me power."

Receiving the answer she was eagerly waiting, Kureha smiled ominously. He had the feeling that for one second, those lips tore until ears.

Part 4

"Father, do you know where Ren went? He's not in his room."

"I happened to see him sitting on the porch just before noon."

Ayano turned an uterly amazed glance at Juugo, who answered matter of course.

"…Father, it is already evening."

"Go and see for yourself. A certain someone who does not want to move at all is supposed to be there."

"…"

Scowling, Ayano cast her eyes down. Her strongly gripped fist was trembling.

"If you tell me he has no outlet for his anger, I'll get angry. Knocking down those Tsuwabuki guys and settling this is so simple and yet…"

"…True"

Evening

Ren, dicovered with the help of Kirika's side, the Special Data Arrangement, although he had no visible wounds, his heart received near fatal damage.

Remaining silent without responding to any questions, secluded inside his shell, Ren was brought home after midnight.

As a result of being left to rest without having to listen to anything, at dawn he recovered enough to take a minimum of communication.

As if he would been asked Ren told it all, without faltering. His own feeling - the fleeting emotion harbored for that girl, the despair when he found the truth - without hiding anything.

In front of the stricken boy nobody could do anything.

Their feelings were summarized in Ayano's words from a while ago. That is - "There is no outlet for his anger."

The act of the Tsuwabuki Household was by no means incorrect. Caring about morals has no meaning. In their line of business that goes beyond the life or death of one person, they are naturally operating for the sake of justice. There was no other way.

There is no choice but to pray to God that time will heal his emotional scars.

"So, what did you plan to do after searching for Ren?"

"What, you ask - I can't leave him alone like that, can I?"

Ren right now was similar to a living corpse.

If he was talked to, he'd give a minimal reply.

If food was given to him, he would eat it.

However, without urgings from other people, left by himself he would not move, not even a finger. Sitting sprawled out, that figure with blank eyes was exactly like a puppet whose strings have been cut.

Sober, Juugo shifted his attention to Ayano, wanting to comfort Ren.

"Can you do something?"

"I don't know if I can."

There was clearly no hesitation in Ayano's response.

"But even so, I can't leave him alone. That kind of helpless situation, I won't admit it. I definitely won't let it end this way."

Making this declaration in a rough tone, Ayano left Juugo's room.

Wow, it really was true…

Voiceless, Ayano murmured to herself. Ren was in the place Juugo said he would be. Sitting on the verande, he was leaning on the left side pillar. Perhaps that attitude never changed since before noon.

Approaching directly, Ayano sat dawn next to him. Ren's eyes moved slightly, perceiving her figure.

"…older sister.."

A feeble murmur escaped. The question *why are you here* did not resound, just calling the name of the person that entered his field of vision, that sort of dull and uninteresting matter.

Ayano did not venture to make eye contact, placing her glance on the garden in front.

Ren too, immediately lost his interest towards Ayano, restoring his glance on his feet.

Without change, for several minutes, time flew quietly.

"If it's me…"

Almost like the sound of blowing wind sliding through gaps, Ayano simply spun her words. For a second time, moving his eyeballs, Ren looked at Ayano, but she continued facing forward.

"Because I am the person that will someday succeed as the head of the Kannagi Family, I understand those Tsuwabuki's point. At the very least I will never say something like *it doesn't matter if Mt. Fuji erupts, go and save that Ayumi girl!*"

"…"

"But even so, that's not what you should be thinking of now, is it?"

"…ee?"

Because that was very unexpected, Ren raised a small doubtful voice.

"Those kind of large scale problems you must leave to adults. A child should give preference to himself. What you should think of right now is what you should do related to Ayumi. That's all."

"…eh…?"

Smiling sweetly Ayano too stared at the dazed Ren.

"You said it, right? That Ayumi is an imitation? She's a clone, her memories are borrowed from another person, that the real Tsuwabuki Ayumi doesn't exist, right?"

"…yes.."

"That can't be true, you big fool!!"

The moment he nodded - no, as soon as "y" was pronounced Ayano grabbed the cute, brother-like Ren by the collar, constricting him.

"Whether it's reproduction, doppelganger, multiplied by cell division, if it has an original will you have no right to look down upon her as an imitation. Deceiving yourself with superficial words, denying the time you yourself spent with Ayumi, why are you doing it?"



Ayano became excessively agitated while shouting but when she finished speaking her calm returned.

Releasing his collar, with sober eyes she overlooked the choking Ren.

"I thought I'd say that by putting the screws on you but you're a bright kid so you already figured it out, didn't you?"

"…"

There was no need to say it.

Although he was surprised when he first found out, once he calmed down and thought about it, it all amounted to *what of it?*

Even if her body and memory have been reproduced Ayumi's personality was certainly original. It was very clear. Because everything bestowed upon her was an imitation, the girl grasped in her hands genuineness.

From the beginning to the end Ren sensed that decision closer than anybody else.

But, for this reason Ren can't help but feel ashamed.

"I didn't understand anything…"

In spite of seeing it from the closest place, he did not *see* anything. Loosing his head, getting caught in the moment, he said a lot of cruel things.

Big brother will surely come to save you.

I want to show you many other things so I'll take you anywhere.

The groundless hopes, the promise of a tomorrow that will never come, he wondered with how much cruelty they resounded in Ayumi's ears. But even so, Ayumi showed a smile.

That's right. That would be nice…

The fact that she didn't reveal the truth was certainly not for her self-protection. So that Ren won't be crushed by the truth's weight, its anguish, its sorrow, she locked it in her chest.

I was a fool!

He wanted to protect Ayumi. He wanted to save the girl by expending all the power he possessed. And yet - he didn't notice he was the one being protected.

He, descendant from the strongest, made a girl scared of her imminent death worry about him and protect him like a baby.

You don't understand anything, you foolish child pretending to be a knight - Yuuji's words hit the bull's eye and left no room for rebuttal. He didn't understand anything.

"That's why…I couldn't do anything…"

With a regretful emotion, he spoke of conclusion. So, everything ended in the worst possible way.

"Don't use the past tense arbitrarily just because you decided the conclusion."

Ayano could not forgive the fact that Ren was full of resignation. Grabbing him by the collar for a second time, she forcefully pulled his hanged head upwards.

"Do you feel like ending it this way? This helpless conclusion, do you approve of it?"

"But…there is nothing I can do for Ayumi-chan anymo- "

"I'm sick of it!"

Very irritated Ayano harshly shook Ren's body.

"You're such a thorough good kiddie! Right now it's not about *for the sake of Ayumi-chan* or something like that. What about you? What do **you** want to do? That's what I want to hear!!"

"…eh…me?"

Faced with a question he never thought of, Ren revealed a confused voice. And yet, Ayano's words did not stop.

"That's right. If it's true you won't do anything anymore, if that's the case, I won't interfere. But if you do so, you'd better label it as *memories of my first love* or something and put it away in some corner of your memory. Frankly, that is the most peaceful settlement. Still…"

Ayano held Ren's cheeks between her hands and brought their eyes at the same height by leaning over a little. And then, directly facing that glance mixed with bewilderment she asked earnestly.

"Still, are you OK with that? Parting in such a way, although it was the last and you will never be able to meet again, you don't regret it? There is nothing you want to tell that girl?"

"…"

Do you want to meet her, do you not want to meet her?

Faced with this choice, he answered without hesitation.

I want to meet her. Even if it's just once. Meet her and then…

But…

"So, what will you do?"

Ayano pressed the hesitating Ren for an answer.

"You won't be able to chase after her if it goes like this - you know, right? You don't have time. Tomorrow, Ayumi-chan will be nowhere to find. No matter what your answer, there will be none to say it to. You have no time to hesitate. Decide now. What should you be doing?"

"…"

Hanging his head down, Ren closed his eyes. And he thought about it. What he wanted to do. What he ought to do. What he must, no matter what.

Dozens of seconds afterwards, at the end of his most serious meditation, the boy slowly opened his mouth.

"About the ceremony, about the living sacrifice, the most righteous thing to do about those, I have yet to realize. However…"

Lifting his head, he looked straight at Ayano.

That gaze held no more indecision.

"However, I want to meet Ayumi-chan one more time. Meet her, apologize to her and I want to tell her - I have something I must tell her no matter what."

"OK. Let's go then."

Ayano responded to those words said with the resolution of a lifetime with a *just out for a bit of shopping* mood.

"…You mean, right now!?"

"That's right. It's not like you need some particular preparation, no? If you need a stop over set, we can buy it at the local supermarket."

"No…that's not the probl- "

With a snap Ayano trusted her index finger at Ren, unable to follow the development's speed.

"Didn't I say it? We have no time. The ceremony is tonight and to begin with, do you think they will let us pass by saying ``I came to meet Ayumi-chan. I have no intention to interfere with the ceremony so please let us past``?"

"…that is perhaps impossible…"

"Not ``perhaps``, it's absolutely impossible. At any rate we have no choice but to push through with brute strength so we'd better move while we still have time."

Saying that, Ayano stood up without waiting for a reply.

"Well, go change your clothes. If Father finds us, an explanation will be difficult so we must not be exposed."

"``Difficult``, you say!? If he finds out it's confinement for us."

If they mess up, it's a deed quite capable of making Mt. Fuji erupt. It's obvious Juugo will never allow it.

"If that's the case, hurry!"

But, once Ayano got like this she couldn't be stopped. Having a thorough knowledge about that, after coming this far he finally resolved himself.

"I understand. Give me five minutes."

"I'm waiting by the rear entrance."

Exchanging a small nod, both of them hurried in different directions.

Chapter 5: Dreams And Reality

Part 1

After changing the train at Kawaguchiko, one of the lake belonging to the Five Lakes of Mt. Fuji, Ayano and Ren took a taxi to the Tsuwabuki residence. Before the private road that led to the residence they got off and forcibly climbed over the iron fence with a clearly written ``NO TRESPASSING`` sign. After that was supposed to be a straight path.

Staring quite anxious at Ayano going forward, planing in a rude entrance, Ren asked.

"Still, is this OK? Approaching so boldly?"

"Then, do you want to try sneaking in? Climbing over the wall and slipping through the defense system and try to finally arrive at Ayumi-chan without the Chijutsushi noticing, do you have that confidence?"

"…no"

That was impossible. The opponents are Chijutsushi. If they step on the ground of the premisses they will be noticed without mistake that instant.

"Right? That's what you call unsuitable orientation. For a Enjutsushi to take covert action is the same as telling the sun <<shine in a more humble manner>>."

"ha…"

They kept walking without change ten odd minutes. The sun faded out and around the time the world became engulfed in darkness the Tsuwabuki residence made an appearance before those two. Both of them looked up at the magnificent manor.

"First of all, we made it in time, huh?"

"Yeah."

Gazing at the majestic style entrance, Ren replied.

"So, how do we get in?"

Ayano was still looking at the gate. An inter phone was not found. It did not seen likely the sound of a knock would reach.

"…shall I burn it?"

"…Nee-sama…"

At Ayano's bold words, Ren murmured in a lamenting voice.

"How can you make up your mind to go that far?"

"How, you ask…my disposition, I guess?"

"Please don't be so proud of it…even if we don't do such an excessive thing, it's not that high we can't climb over, right?"

Leaving the gate aside, the height of the wall that followed it on both sides was, at best, approximately 3 meters. Certainly it wasn't a height that couldn't be climbed over.

"Well, I hope that's safe."

Ayano nodded and bent over in order to jump over the wall. At exactly the same time.

Raising a dull creak, the thick doors slowly opened.

"…"

Ayano and Ren exchanged glances and both shrugged their shoulders.

"We are being let in."

"How thoughtful."

Exchanging a sarcastic smile both stepped inside the grounds.

And then - they met the receptionist.

Approximately twenty minutes before

In the large underground gave, Yuuji looked up at the crystal pillar encasing Mayumi. Guiding the above moonlight the crystal produced a faint radiance shining in the darkness.

In the surroundings other Chijutsushi were hastening the preparation for the ceremony. But, he completely disregarded that clatter, turning his glance on Mayumi - and only her.

"You're really earnest, aren't you?"

A whisper shook his ear. Unaware of Kureha's presence standing right behind, Yuuji was not surprised anymore. Managing that level of presence was a matter of course. He knew it first hand.

"What?" he asked without turning around.

Kureha did not blame him for it. She informed him of what he had to do.

"We have a guest."

"Who is it?"

"Two fire presences. I still don't feel the wind. But if it's that man, he is quite capable of following us around without anyone noticing."

Talking serious words with a smiling face Kureha gave an order again.

"Go meet them. I'm leaving the rest to you."

"I will return before long."

Including a quiet self confidence, Yuuji consented. Without change, he started walking to the gateway but after going forward several steps he turned around.

"Can you answer me one thing?"

"Say it", Kureha generously nodded.

"Why did you seek so much power and violate the taboo? Your ability was supposed to be the most powerful in the entire family."

"Why?"

For a moment Kureha had a blank facial expression, as if taken by surprise. Nevertheless she immediately raised her even lips, expressing a somewhat otherworldly archaic smile.

"Why? Isn't that obvious? *Because I didn't have you*."

"…ha?"

Yuuji frowned in doubt. But, Kureha did not permit further questioning.

"Go."

With a quiet and yet resolute tone she ordered. Yuuji had no right to oppose her.

"…yes"

With a small nod, Yuuji started walking once more. After looking hard at that retreating figure until it disappeared from her field of vision, Kureha looked up at the younger sister sealed in the crystal.

The shape of the girl sleeping inside the shining crystal was a fantastic spectacle that gave one the impression of a scene from a fairy-tale. Placing her hand on the crystal, Kureha looked up at Mayumi with a gaze full of affection.

"You didn't notice, did you? How blessed you were. How loved you were. I too, love you so very much. That's why - that's why I will let you go while being so blessed."

Visibly pouring out the peak of her emotion, Kureha pushed her forehead against the crystal pillar. After savoring the icy texture for a few seconds, she turned to the Chijutsushi underneath and informed the most high-ranking practitioner among them:

"I will temporarily excuse myself. Continue the preparation."

"Yes"

The practitioners nodded without showing surprise. Kureha could be said to be the one supervising

but she couldn't directly participate in the ceremony. Therefore, if no unforeseen situation happened, the fact that she was not there was not a particular impediment.

Throwing a glance at the practitioners continuing to work, Kureha went towards the cave's interior. Arriving at the deepest part, where not even the light from the crystal pillar reached, she softly began to float.

It didn't have the sense of speed similar to Fuutsushi flying by *wearing* wind. It was a gentle float as if the body would be slightly lighter than the atmosphere, giving the impression of a balloon or a blimp.

Going beyond the ceiling of the cave, Kureha continued ascending. She quietly penetrated a shaft that opened in the ceiling, far from any light source, a gap unnoticed by anyone. Rising about four or five meters in the pit, Kureha chanted a small incantation.

"*Light*"

After frequent twinkling, the soft light born in the air illuminated the pit's appearance.

The pit had a diameter of roughly ten meters and a clean, bowling round shape. It seems it doesn't con-

nect with the above ground but it is fairly long. No matter how you think about it, it wasn't made by nature. And in the center of it, there was a rock.

A cluster of rocks arranged in a rough elliptical shape.

If you consider this is a huge cave underground, it's not something especially unusual. That is, if you consider the fact that it is floating in the air without any kind of support.

"Fu fu"

Expressing a light smile, Kureha is approaching the rock lump. And then she motionlessly stares at that surface. Because it was flowing in the air, it was clear that was more than a lump of rocks.

On the surface the full length portrait of an elderly man was thrown into relief.

Enjoyed from the bottom of her heart, she gazed at the man's carving - it's hardened closed eyes, its expression warped with anguish. And then, she spoke:

"Greetings, Father."

For a while there was no reaction. Still, gradually, little by little, the rock lump began to shiver slightly.

Visibly moaning in agony, visibly twisting his humiliated body, the rock lump continued its frail oscillation. And then -

"O…oo…ooooo…you…yooooooouuuuuu…"

The man's eyes, engraved in stone opened. That eye, glares at Kureha floating in front and from the inorganic throat, curses spun out.

"You…Kurehaaaaaa…haw dare…how dare you…to your father…"

That *thing* was once referred to as Tsuwabuki Iwao.

Kureha and Mayumi's father, the man praised as the strongest practitioner of the family - the man who, it was reported a week before, was recuperating in his own room because of illness - right now was reduced to a lump of rocks.

"Ah, that felt good."

That look full of hatred made Kureha's lips curve with contemptuous ease.

"If you have no answer, I believe it's time for you to die."

"Damn you…you…betrayer…"

Iwao groaned his words as if spitting blood, but he couldn't do anything more than that. No matted how

much power he possessed once, now he can't move a finger and was nothing but a pitiful prisoner who had no choice but to spit out his grudge.

Kureha sneered at that unsightly appearance.

"Having said you are the strongest Chijutsushi, how silly of you unable to separate from the ground. Ignoring the poison that desecrated the body, you had no choice but to assimilate rocks within reach to save your life. That is truly unsightly."

She ridiculed him, enjoying herself from the bottom of her heart.

It happened a week ago.

Iwao and Kureha - the parent and child mutually hating each other, finally crossed swords in the big cave that was the sacred ground of the family. Without a particle of leniency, both let out certain kill blows.

Thus Kureha's <<superpower>> was superior to Iwao's <<strongest>>. With the help of that invisible power, Kureha fixated the half-dead Iwao in the air. Even with the near invulnerability and resilience of an Chijutsushi, if he is not touching the ground - when all

connection with the ground's <<Ki>> was cut, Iwao was degraded to an average human and had no means of healing his wounds.

"Is that all it takes?" asked Kureha, visibly disappointed.

"Known as the strongest, Father's might, is it really only this amount?"

"You…fool…"

His lungs becoming useless, together with the vividly red blood, Iwao spit out curses.

"The Tsuwabuki Family's…disgrace…"

"…"

Kureha's reaction, regarding the abuse she got used to hearing was the throwing of a small knife, dripping in poison, with one uninterested long breath.

"Kuuuu…guh…ahhhhhh"

Towards the suffering Iwao, Kureha sneered cheaply, merely saying over her shoulder.

"I was thinking you will let me hear a somewhat fresh utterance - but enough. Please die."

Kureha prepared the poisoned blade for the sake of this day. The fact that the strongest Chijutsushi was killed by poison - when thinking of so much disgrace,

her body was trembling in a dark joy, but now it didn't even matter.

But, before Kureha's eyes, preparing to deliver the final blow, something she didn't anticipated happened.

A huge stone pillar rose from the ground, connecting Iwao to the solid earth.

"…eh?"

Kureha promptly smashed the stone pillar. Immediately suppressing any kind of link with the ground, only the spearhead of the stone pillar was sized by Iwao and taken in, floating in the air.

Calculating the quantity of <<Ki>> taken from the large rock, lightly, Kureha took a breath of relief. To neutralize the poison, it's entirely insufficient.

"I was somewhat surprised. That you were left with such power - did he die?"

Iwao's vigor was only supposed to restrain the poison's progress with all his might. So, when he revealed such a bold move, it wouldn't be unusual for him to die the moment it was put in operation.

Still, just to be sure, ready to smash the mass of rock floating in the air, Kureha frowned truly in doubt.

"Oh - "

Softly dancing in midair, she is drawing near the mass of rock. And then she saw that, sticking on the surface.

"…pfuu…ahahahahahahahahaha!!"

After becoming speechless for several seconds, Kureha's body was convulsed with laughter to the point of breaking. In the corners of her eyes, even tears were floating.

"Oh…oh Father…what a…what a…"

The lump of rock suspended in the air. On that surface was clinging Iwao, changing into stone.

Kureha ridiculed that miserable shape to her heart's content. The aim of her Father, she was seeing through it now for sure. Mustering the remaining strength for one resuscitation move.

But at the time it was defeated, Iwao took extreme means for the sake of surviving and changed himself to rock. Poison doesn't run in rocks. Rocks do not die. By means of changing into an inorganic substance one second before his death, Iwao suspended his own time.

"Good grief, what a filthy way of living or perhaps not knowing when to give up, apparently not killing you instantly was the correct decision. You have shown me such a pleasant performance."

No matter how much he was being ridiculed, Iwao could do nothing anymore. Already without energy to even turn back but even assuming he could turn back, immediately the poison would be taking his life.

Unless Kureha doesn't take down the mass of rock, he has no choice but to carry on living changed to rock for eternity.

"I understand. In deference to the hatefulness of that resignation, I will let you live a little longer. That is, until the moment I fulfill my longstanding desire."

Despising her father's anguished face, Kureha laughed loudly one more time.

Thus, Iwao managed to survive one more week. If, in this state, it's accurate to say he is living.

"You…do you understand what are you guilty of?"

Including an endless curse, Iwao muttered. Surely, that voice didn't hold a simple personal grudge but

was pregnant with the sense of duty, as head of the family.

Keeping the beast's force in the bodies of the family who sealed it at the cost of it's members' life.

The union with the sealed demon beast - that was the source of Kureha's power - that was the reason that made Iwao decide on his daughter's conviction.

For the Tsuwabuki Clan, who have been sealing the demon beast for more than three hundred years, that may be called the most serious taboo, above all else.

But, at Iwao's outcry, almost vomiting blood, Kureha laughed lightly.

"But, wouldn't it have been wasteful? Although the long awaited power is just in front of me, to just put it back to sleep…"

"You…you…fool…!"

In response to Iwao's wrath, the rock cracked here and there and broken pieces scattered.

A deed similar with scraping his body, but even so, his anger didn't subside.

"What do you plan to do by locking me up in such a place? Don't tell me, you want to release the demon beast?"

"Of course not."

The angry roar that once made the entire family yield was let go past, like a gentle breeze. Kureha shrugged her shoulders.

"We are carrying out the ceremony smoothly. That is correct, with the power of two sacrifices, I will show you a seal stronger than ever."

"…two…?two, you said…!?"

"Yes, two. Ayumi and Mayumi. The only daughter you love, I have decided to use her on this occasion."

The other daughter, the one who was not loved, raised words of cruelty, together with a cynical smile.

The man's face, carved in stone, was warped with fury.

"I don't allow it! That alone I won't allow! I won't let Mayumi become a sacrifice!"

"Then, what *will* you do? Can you do something with that body locked in stone? Are you some acquittance of Sanzouhoushi?"

"Guh…mee…"

At Kureha's mockery, confident in her overwhelming superiority, Iwao groaned.

"Why?" he asked, his voice carrying the sound of supplication.

"Even if it's only Ayumi, she ought to be feasible for a satisfactory seal. To even use Mayumi, what is your purpose? If.. if you wish for the family's hegemony, then - "

"I don't."

Kureha coldly discarded Iwao's proposal.

"I have no use for such a thing. My goal is consistent with what I said earlier - the effective practical use of resources."

"Wh..at…?"

Frowning, Iwao asked back, in doubt. But midway he perceived something and his body - or perhaps the mass of rock trembled as if stuck by lightning. Opening his narrow eyes to the utmost limit, he stared at Kureha's thin smile. As his doubt turned into conviction, that look was painted with nothing but pure horror.

"Y - you…you…never - !"

Abstaining from that light smile, Kureha indifferently starred at her father, trembling with fear.

“Fu, fufufufu - “

That irrepressible chuckle reverberated in the gloomy prison.

Part 2

"As I thought, you came, huh?"

Ren didn't show any surprise, seeing that Yuuji was expecting him very matter of course.

It was very simple.

If it happens someone would stand up in front of him and block his way, that would be no one else but Yuuji.

However, having come this far, Ren had no intention of prolonging the fight. This boy that dislikes conflict opened his mouth in order to somehow settle this peacefully.

"Good evening."

"…"

Yuuji's severely strained face, relaxed for a moment, visibly tired. He asked in a somewhat reluctant manner.

"You…why did you come here?"

"Well…"

What does he want to do, the answer he finally arrived at after thinking about it, Ren spoke it slowly as if trying to ascertain its value by putting it into words.

"I want to meet Ayumi-chan once more. I have no intention of getting in the way of the ceremony this time so, won't you please let us pass?"

It was a proposal full of candor. However it's not always true that tractability is a necessary virtue at any age.

"…huh"

Yuuji gave up as hopeless Ren's childish bullshit and instead focused on Ayano who was looking at both of them from a little distance.

"And you?"

Ayano waved her hands, appearing to say <<Don't mind me>>.

"Ah, I am Ren's escort. Think of me like nothing but air."

"As if!"

Yuuji became exasperated faced with these two whose remarks made it seem they didn't understand the situation.

"Get out, both of you! We're kind of busy, you know!!"

"…I'm afraid that is impossible."

Finally gave up on this pointless conversation, Ren reversed his submissive attitude. Obviously, with a battle attitude.

"I'll meet Ayumi-chan once more. I decided so. If you get in the way-"

"What a talkative chap."

Yuuji coldly interrupted Ren's statement.

"If you can't win a theoretical argument, only then are you ready to dirty your hands? That degree of resolution is pointless. Just go back home before you hurt yourself."

Those words were so full of confidence you wouldn't even consider he lost just yesterday. Taking that slight as a personal offense, Ayano raised her eyebrows with a twitch.

"Hey, why is this guy so proud?"

She came forth with loud footsteps. Enraiha has yet to be drawn but it's clear from her attitude she's asking for a fight.

Her scarlet gold aura gushing out, Ayano declares proudly.

"Do you want me to teach you in detail what happens when you let your big mouth run about in front of two direct descendants of Kannagi?"

But, she couldn't advance any further. Raising his hand, Ren obstructed Ayano's way.

"Please wait."

"Wait a minute, do you still want to…"

Ren shook his head at the scowling Ayano.

"No, it's not like that- "

And then, he faced Yuuji.

"I'll do it. Onee-sama please stand back."

"…"

In silence, Ayano alternatively looked at both Ren and Yuuji. They seemed to be locked on each other.

To force one's way through in that atmosphere requires a great deal of nerve, courage and insensibility.

Letting out a bored sight Ayano gave up on intervening.

"…Well, we still have a bit of time."

Besides, the opponent already lost once. There's no problem, even if she were to remain a spectator.

"Be careful."

And with that, she took her distance from the two.

She was prepared to jump in at any moment but, for the time being, she is entrusting Ren.

"Do your best."

Even if she knew he couldn't hear it, still, Ayano cheers for Ren a little.

"Could you please step aside ~ you do know you can't win against me?"

Even if he thought it was pointless Ren tried to persuade him just once more. To say it plainly, it became nothing more than a provocation and Yuuji, without moving a single muscle, rejected that proposal.

"Enough of that repetitious talk!"

Placing killing intent on his frozen voice, Yuuji loudly roared.

"Just try to kill this *me* if you can!"

" -!!"

Feeling Yuuji's <<Ki>>'s explosive rise, Ren immediately melted the ground beneath his feet. But, the offensive came from the front.

"Using that cheap trick?"

Together with an angry roar, a huge amount of pebbles - enough to fill his vision - approached Ren. Because each and every one was fired with bullet-like speed, receiving that attack, the human body would become more than just covered in holes but crushed like minced meat and the corpse impossible to identify.

"Yaaa!!!"

Raising a high, clear soprano yell Ren swung down his right hand. The golden flame that gushed out burned the countless stones to nothing.

However -

"Am I being pressed down?"

In Ren's pupil both surprise and shudder dwell. Those pebbles are really forcing back the fire torrent. Although he's not yet using his whole power, he included enough of it to thoroughly defeat someone like Yuuji from last night.

"Kuuuu- "

In a panic, Ren raised the heating power. But, faster than that, Yuuji made his move. Drawing nearer while concealing himself in the stream of throwing stones, he suddenly appeared before Ren's eyes.

“ -!!”

He was completely taken by surprise. Without wasting time on interception, he was forced into close combat.

Barely managing to avoid a straight hit from right overhead, he wasn’t able to avoid a left middle kick that was sent from the opposite angle.

“Kuuuu!!”

Although just barely managing to defend himself, Ren, shorter and younger, couldn’t stop the kick of a highly trained adult. His arms sustained the damage but were blown off, and he was thrown in the fence.

“Ren!”

“I’m…fine…”

While shaking his head, Ren stood up. It didn’t seem Yuuji would pursue. Taking a short distance, he calmly observed the degree of damage he inflicted.

Is this what it comes down to?

Voiceless, Ren groaned.

For a spirit practitioner, from the power they are manipulating - for an Enjutsushi fire, for a Chijutsushi earth and rocks they don’t receive any damage.

For this reason, they can jump right into the Jutsu they created and be able to use it as camouflage or protective wall.

It's not really an original move. You could say it's one of the basics.

And yet, up until now Yuuji didn't try to use it, in spite of the fact that when thinking about the physique difference, close combat is advantageous.

Before, he had an aim. Not just to defeat Ren but to verify that "when facing an Enjutsushi a Chijutsushi is superior."

He was being conceited.

But Yuuji right now held no arrogance. Not as a Jutsushi but as a single human being, he used all his power to defeat the enemy - that's all he was thinking.

In general, rather than the fact that he had become more powerful, his stubbornness in paying no attention to his behavior was far more dangerous to Ren.

Agreement or no agreement, he was being taught a lesson about the strength of a person ready for death.

"But even I cannot yield on this - I'm not going to lose!"

"Shut it, brat!"

Both their will powers turned to force and clashed. The devastating fire storm swallowed all the cracks produced one after another. Weaving their way in the explosion made by the red hot plasma and gigantic rocks crashing into each other, their fists met.

It seems it was a negligence. In regards to the result of the hand to hand fight, without even thinking about it, it will remain the same. It was obvious.

A twelve years old child versus an adult male. If it comes down to who has a more trained body, Yuuji's is superior. It was impossible to lose.

Therefore, he must have been negligent.

So, at the time his thrust, powerful enough to pulverize the brain and splat spinal fluid everywhere was beautifully evaded, Yuuji lost sight of Ren's figure completely.

One moment later, when he spotted him again, Ren slipped his extended arm in Yuuji's blind spot and his elbow hit him in the pit of the stomach.

That kinetic energy resulted from a rush similar to teleportation was all poured in one blow. That shock, stronger than his drilled abs crushed Yuuji's stomach and escaped trough his back.

His heavy built body lightly danced in mid air. Beside the fact that Yuuji would have fallen down eventually Ren concentrated his consciousness and power.

"Goooooooo!!"

Four thin refined heat rays accurately shot out the joints of his legs and shoulders. Yuuji's body fell like a puppet and rolled down in one of the craters one of them made. There, Ren delivered the final blow.

The giant fireball he brought down from overhead completely covered the crater like a lid. And then - one instance later it exploded.

Ayano, overcome with surprise for a little while, finally spoke with a stunned expression.

"…even without the direct hit, don't you think this is overkill?"

The last blow Ren fired avoided to directly hit like last time and only gave the shock wave damage. But even so, if a normal human were to receive so much shock he would have died ten times already. It was that degree of detonation.

"No, but it should be powerful enough to beat a Chijutsushi."

"I think that at that level you won't have that problem…"

While answering, Ayano peered into the bottom of the crater. Starring inside the dust, she saw a shadow that for some reason did not seem human.

"Wow this is amazing. All his limbs are still connected."

"…Nee-sama, if you have something to say, how about you say it clearly?", Ren replied with a sulky voice at Ayano's heavy sarcasm.

While saying that, the dust cleared and the state at the bottom could be seen much easier. Yuuji's face could be clearly seen.

"Oh, unexpected but he's still human-shaped."

"…Nee-sama…"

Ren took offense but like Ayano said, Yuuji's body retained it's shape well enough. Without becoming flat and crushed by the pressure he was firmly and roughly left behind. It seems that one way or another he survived.

"Well, I wonder if I should say you crushed him just right. To heal it all maybe one or two months will do the trick I guess."

"Yes."

While it seemed his broken bones cured unexpectedly easy, the four holes that opened at the base of his limbs evaporated both his bones and flesh. As one would expect it was impossible to immediately regenerate those.

"Well then, let's go forward."

"Yes."

Deciding that Yuuji became powerless, those two head towards the interior of the mansion. But, as if choosing the moment the pair turned its back to the crater, a voice stopped them from the back.

"Wait…"

"…eh?"

Hearing the chilly, dry voice Ayano's facial expression changed. In a strained voice, she asked Ren.

"The voice right now, who was it?"

"…"

Without replying Ren pointed his gaze at the bottom of the crater. Ayano too understood. That was Yuuji's voice. But, that voice was too calm. As if the person uttering it had no injuries.

Raising his head from the bottom of the crater Yuuji stared at Ren. His hip joints had holes in them so it should have been impossible for him to get up. His fighting strength was supposed to be zero. And yet…

"How about you stop? From here on it's a matter of life and death."

Yuuji ignored Ayano's pointless proposal. His eyes were firmly set on only Ren.

"As I thought, I can reach you , the way I am right now."

With a serene facial expression, unbecoming of a severely wounded person, Yuuji murmured so. Sensing a certain something from those words, Ayano ordered Ren with a sharpness different from before.

"Ren, give him the finishing blow. Enough to obliterate his very cells."

"Killing him would be useless."

While being just as vigilant, Ren rejected Ayano's order. Although understanding that something will happen if he was left unattended, he still couldn't do it.

Even if I kill in order to meet her, Ayumi-chan won't be pleased.

No matter how much he himself wanted to do it, that was insignificant when compared with making her sad.

"Alright."

Suddenly, Yuuji murmured in a low voice. The pair of eyes that were supposed to stare at Ren, before one knows were looking up at the sky overhead. For some reason that gaze reminded Ren once more of Ayumi's, the first time he met her. As if that was the last opportunity, the earnest pupil looking up to the moon.

"Alright. I'll join your scheme. Whether it's my life or my soul, take whatever you need. So - so, in exchange - "

The hand that was supposed to be paralyzed was grasped tightly. Bearing up in tragedy, opening his eyes, literally throwing everything away Yuuji shouts:

"Give me power!!"

"Shall I give you power?"

In front of Mayumi sealed in the crystal pillar, Kureha whispered so. But, obviously there is no way to

earn power free of charge. Compensation must be given.

If you choose to loose your humanity…

Thus, Kureha didn't hide even that. For the first time he understood.

That no matter what compensation she wanted, Yuuji had no right to refuse.

In fact, Yuuji didn't hesitate. About fusing with a demon beast and becoming one being with Kureha. Violating the family's greatest taboo and becoming a criminal that could never be permitted.

But that was not the only danger. The power that exceeds the vessel becomes an excessive burden for the body. Different from the way Kureha did it, spending time on getting accustomed to it little by little, if he were to receive a large amount of power at once, the power will force the body to change.

"If you so wish, the Majyu (trad: demon beast) will give you an infinite amount of power."

Kureha warned him carefully. That point at least was honest.

'"But a power that becomes too great will snatch away your human form. And eventually, even your

human heart. Try to be careful. Fall back before recovery becomes impossible."'

But simultaneously, Yuuji was convinced that Kureha wished him to go beyond recovery. For his power to rampage and to be turned into a monster that was her real purpose, or at least a part of it.

But that's fine.

He will protect Mayumi. That was his one absolute mission. If it's for that reason, he doesn't regret throwing away everything else.

That's what he decided. On that day, five years before -

Ojou-sama…if it's you…certainly…

The last moment as a human, when he decided his fate, he thought back that moment.

Gachin!

That kiss tasted like blood.

The grand vigor made their teeth clash and the lips in-between cut. The crash and pain made them see sparks.

"Hyaaa…"

He was trying to complain but the stiff lips couldn't successfully pronounce it. When holding his hand to his lips, his palm became wet with a luke-warm liquid.

While quipping the blood from his soiled clothes with a handkerchief he overlooked the small attacker.

That side deemed to have received considerable damage, squatting down and moaning.

Trying to get rid of his clumsy voice, Yuuji talked with caution.

"What are you trying to do so suddenly, Ojou-sama?"

Thereupon, Mayumi boldly stood up and stared at Yuuji with eyes wet from tears.



"That was my first kiss. Take responsibility."

"Wha…"

That was absurd. That was excessively pushy. But the bewildered Yuuji was relentlessly driven into a corner by Mayumi.

"What's this, this is not manly at all. If you say such mushy words I'll tell Father *Yuuji forcibly kissed me.*"

"Ha - have mercy!"

Reminded of Iwao's face doting on his daughter, the muscles on Yuuji's back trembled. If she were to say such a thing, there is no doubt about it, he would get the capital punishment.

"It's not like my responsibility came off, right? What are you telling me to do?"

"Stay close to me."

At Yuuji's distracted shout, Mayumi answered in a frighteningly quiet voice.

"…eh?"

"Always stay close to me. Don't leave even for a second. Don't think about anything else and look only at me."

That was a strange way of talking. Considering only her words, they seemed full of passionate courting but her tone had no particle of sweetness.

They were like the urgent words of a seriously ill person that held its last wish on death's door.

Yuuji turned a pained expression upon Mayumi.

"…Did you find out?"

"That this year thirty years will have past?"

Mayumi answered the question with another question. But the question itself became a clear response to Yuuji's.

From the last ceremony thirty years passed. The mountain's spirit, although calmed down at the moment could activate at any moment. In a not too far future, the ceremony will invariably take place. And just like before the Chijutsushi's life will be sacrificed.

"Do you know what the Head is trying to do?"

"It's impossible.", Mayumi answered bluntly.

I would rather not harbor such half hearted hopes - from her tone the murmur of her true heart could be heard.

"It's something that was never possible before. It's almost certainly impossible now. Someday I will loose

my life to calm the mountain. The same way as until now, right?"

"Ojou-sama…"

"It doesn't mean I don't want to. After all, that is our mission. This is what we exist for. However."

Completely changing from her crushed to death tone, Mayumi talked on and on bursting out.

"But it's still frightening! It's not like I'm not afraid of death. I cannot help but feel like running away. Why does it have to be me? Why do I have to die no matter what? WHY?"

"O- Ojou-sama…"

Taking a sidelong glance at the nervous Yuuji, troubled because of it, Mayumi promptly regained her calm. Weeping off her tears she said in a broken tone.

"I feel so refreshed after letting it out."

"…eh?"

"After all, I wished for someone I can be with this way. I cannot entrust it to a loose-tongued servant, nor can I worry my father even more."

"…because of that, it was me?"

Mayumi nodded at Yuuji's disappointed tone.

"That's right. I picked you. For the years until I die, I will be given your life. Look only at me, worry only about me, live only for me. I already gave your remuneration, so you don't have a say in this."

"…is the remuneration the earlier head butt?"

"A kiss, it's a kiss!"

Mayumi answered back very seriously.

"The sacrifice of my purity should obligate you, so I won't do it ever again. That was my first and last kiss. It was something extremely rare so be grateful!"

"…"

Yuuji didn't answer.

From his standpoint he couldn't refuse but an almost adult man being glad because a thirteen years old girl kissed him would be problematic from another point of view.

Mayumi's glance, when looking up at the bitter Yuuji, gradually became uneasy. Looking hard at him with upturned eyes, she said in a sulky tone.

"It's not that long a period. No matter how much Father will delay it, it's at the most five or six years. If it's only that much selfishness, can't you put up with it?"

"…"

With a sigh, Yuuji accepted the girl's persuasion.

It can't be helped. It's also the responsibility of adults to listen to children's whim. In the near future, Mayumi will become the sacrifice and she is certainly a pitiful child.

"I understand. It's fine if I become Ojou-sama's sandbag right?"

That was a very irresponsible response but even so Mayumi bowed her head, eyes sparkling.

"Yes, that's right! You will listen to everything I say! And, if I ever try to run away - "

Hearing that unpardonable speech, Yuuji's alertness strengthened. If she were to say <<Let's run away together!>>, by no means would he agree. Because when comparing a child's self-indulgence with the fate of the family, it amounts to nothing.

But Mayumi said so:

"If it comes to that, you have to catch me no matter what. Don't you ever let me escape."

"…!!"

Yuuji stared hard at Mayumi catching his breath. He backed off, pressed down in front of those direct

eyes that didn't have a particle of a child's dependance.

Arriving at this moment, he finally noticed his own misunderstanding.

Mayumi didn't seek a target for her childish egotistic anger. Accepting the family's real responsibility, she searched for someone who could support her weak self that could be crushed at any moment.

Feeling ashamed of his own ignorance, Yuuji knelt in a formal posture.

"Mayumi-sama, from this day on I offer you all of my loyalty."

"…Thank you. It will be relied on."

Mayumi too, accepted it in a ceremonious tone. But, suddenly her attitude changed.

"Hey, Yuuji."

"…what?"

With a smile meant to tease Yuuji's upturned face, Mayumi whispered.

"If it turns out I don't have to become a sacrifice - at that time let's continue that kiss, shall we?"

At Mayumi's words said with a little shyness appropriate for her age, Yuuji replied smiling.

"Yes - With pleasure."

In the five years that followed, Mayumi didn't speak of that day once. By any chance, perhaps she forgot. Perhaps that was a meaningless promise, something that suddenly came into a child's mind.

But even so that was the day Yuuji decided. Even if it's all the family, even if it's the head standing at the peak of it, he dedicates all his loyalty to Mayumi only.

Whether it is the relationship between a man and a woman, the contract between a master and servant, the pledge of a knight to protect the noble lady or if it was something different altogether, Yuuji didn't think about the nature of their relationship, not even once. Because such things didn't matter.

There was only one valuable thing. To protect Mayumi and Mayumi only. Only that decision, sacred above all else.

No matter what he has to throw away, even if he were to sacrifice all else.

I will definitely protect you!!

Due to the influx of power, both his heart and body changed. But that most important emotion could never disappear from inside him.

No matter who tried to, only that couldn’t be snatched away.

Part 3

The ground was violently rumbling. Even if it's Ayano or Ren, unrelated to the Spirits of the earth, they understood the show of high density power, the activation of the earth pulse to the extent of seeing its radiation.

"Wait a second…this is…"

Seeing the endlessly congregation of enormous power gathering at one point, Ayano's face became stiff.

"Ren! Without delay - "

"I told you that's no good!"

While answering in that manner, Ren's complexion was bad nevertheless.

At the bottom of the crater shrouded in dust, a power like that of a volcano on the verge of erupting was coming together. The focal point of it it's probably Yuuji.

However -

Can he control this kind of power?

The aggregate amount of the converging power clearly reached tenfold of Yuuji's original strength. It doesn't seem he can control it very well.

He took a defensive stance against a probable spontaneous discharge but no matter how much time passes, the fearful shock doesn't come. Rather, the ground's vibration and the influx of power are in the process of being stilled.

" Which means…"

Timidly shifting his attention, the dust acting like a screen vanished in an instant. At once the field of vision cleared and the bottom of the crater became visible.

"…uaaa!"

He let out an exclamation unintentionally. A three meter tall giant was standing there.

It's surface was thoroughly covered in hard stone. Or perhaps it was made of stone to the core.

Its hands and legs, its head, the basic components were human-like but all its separate parts were angular. Its extremities were very thick and its fists much bigger than its head.

Although resembling, that silhouette had delicate deviations from the human form, and if a similarity must be found, maybe a robot appearing in an anime would be closest.

"…it feels like something really amazing appeared, right?"

While throwing a sidelong glance at the dumbfounded Ren, who murmured so, Ayano asked for confirmation.

"Do you still want to go at it alone?"

Ren nodded with no hesitation.

"Well, I'll see how far I can go. If it becomes dangerous please save me, OK?"

Ayano responded at Ren's joke-like smile, deadly serious.

"That's what I was planning to do but…do try not to instantly die."

"…I'll be careful."

While overlooking the rock giant standing in the crater, Ren thought so.

That must be Yuuji's former self but…did it retain any consciousness?

The answer appeared instantly. The giant that up until now stood still, started to move as if inspecting its body.

Holding his hand before its face, gripping his fist and relaxing it. Doing it all over again with the other hand, lowering his gaze and inspecting his body and feet.

And then circling his head, it made a complete rotation. He carefully observes his back.

"…I see."

From the giant's mouth a dry murmur escaped. Although somewhat lowered and cracked, that was definitely Yuuji's voice.

"Is this…power…?"

The face made of rocks showed a self derisive smile. Without knowing why, Ren clearly understood that.

The rock giant - Yuuji lifted his head and seized Ren. And then he said:

"Are you laughing at me, reduced to this appearance, brat?"

"…"

"But I don't regret it. If this will protect Ojou-sama, I don't care about being degraded to a monster. This is my resolution! Do you think you can break it!?"

"…"

Ren didn't say a word. For the sake of that one important thing to throw away everything else, not looking back at the fact that he himself would become a victim, he had no choice but be overwhelmed by that sort of firm determination.

But although he was speechless, somewhere in his heart, he thought about denying such a thing.

Is <<to protect>> something like that? Is it impossible to protect without sacrificing it all, without throwing everything else away?

So far, Ren was mostly in the place of the one being protected. Protected by Kazuma, protected by Ayano, by a lot of other people, always being protected.

This uncomfortable feeling he didn't feel from them, he felt it now from Yuuji. Especially Kazuma. For that brother of his to say *Even in exchange of my life, I will definitely protect you!*, he just couldn't imagine it.

Is it because he's strong? No. It's not just that. Between this man and Onii-sama something at a fundamental level is different…

He had the feeling he understood something. <<Something>> that could break this state of affair, already reaching it's limit.

And that was -

"Let's go!"

But, the answer he finally grasped, was washed away in a torrent of earth and sand. Sensing a terrific force, Ren released the flame with all its power.

"Kuuuu!"

The backlash that almost blew him away was firmly withstood by his legs. He was being pressed down.

Experiencing for the first time in his life loosing by misusing his powers, Ren felt horror.

The moment he tried to concentrate his mind on straining his power even more, Ayano's voice shouted in his ears.

"Behind you!"

"!!"

Reflexively, Ren jumped forward. Simultaneously he expended a flame barrier at the back. However,

breaking through even that barrier the rock fist hit Ren's back.

Chasing Ren, that flew like a shell, the rocky build was changed into a hurricane. Catching up with Ren flying in the air in the twinkling of an eye, the giant's leg that wasn't by no means inferior to his hands, flung Ren up, right overhead.

"Kuuuu…"

The only thing that Ren could do in the space between Yuuji's leg and his own body was to interpose a small fireball.

The detonation of the fireball slightly decreased the kick's power, but Ren's body soared even higher in the sky.

"Guuu…haaa…"

Even higher than his body, his consciousness that flew beyond the clouds was restored by the wave motion of a mighty power. The ground's ominous howl could be heard.

Something with an unbelievable amount of attack power is coming.

This is bad…if I don't counter-attack it…

Although thinking that, his muddy consciousness can't concentrate to the level of invoking the Juutsu. At his wits end, he had no choice but to wait for the fatal attack.

But -

"Gobaah!"

The one blew away was Yuuji. A sharpened wind blade cut through the rock on both his arms and diagonally slashed deeply in torso, from the shoulder downwards.

"…eh? Wh - what…"

At the excessively convenient development, for a second Ren's brain failed to understand. Continuing to fall down in a daze, he doesn't notice the earth is rapidly closing.

But a soft wind stopped Ren gently. A strong arm caught his body fluttering like a feather, embracing it.

The sensation of that arm, Ren recognized it as something very familiar. Without having to look at his face, he understood.

"You guys, what are you doing at this place?"

A composed voice with no feeling of tension whatsoever. A presence always firm. There is no mistake.

And yet, fearful of the one in a million chance, Ren nervously looked up to the man's face.

The usual cynical smile was right there.

"Onii-sama!"

"Yo. First of all, it's good you're alive. Don't be so reckless."

With the usual mood, Yagami Kazuma smiled.

"So, what are you guys doing?"

Once again, Kazuma asked in wonder. But at that point, Ayano was drawing near with a changed expression.

"Kazumaaaaaaaa!!"

"Hey, what's up? You seem kind of angry for some reason."

"That's because I am angry!", Ayano retaliated as if trying to hit him.

"Where have you been until now? You don't even answer your phone!"

"Where you ask, because of my job I was here all this time. Now that you say it, I did close my phone."

He took the phone from his pocket and turned it on. Both the incoming log and the answering machine were buried with phones from Ayano.

"You…this is quite a breach of manners…"

"Then answer it already! Leaving that aside, whose job is it?"

"This things."

Kazuma pointed at a place on his left, obliquely upwards. Following the line of that finger Ayano recognized it for the first time.

"Long time no see!"

A small fairy waved her hand. Remembering the large turmoil that thing created Ayano instantly flipped out.

"Ahhh! Yooouuuuu!"

"Kyaaa - so scary. Help me Kazuma ◎ ".

As expected Tiana hid behind Kazuma. But suddenly Kazuma's hand reached out and grabbed her body and carelessly flung her aside.

"I don't remember being requested to be your bodyguard."

"Eh! Such a thing - . If I die the compensation will…"

"You're not the one who will pay the compensation. I will claim it directly from the fairy's patriarch."

"Auuuuu…such a thing…Uhyaaa!?"

Tiana barely managed to avoid the flame sword swung from the back with no hesitation. Looking over her shoulder, she saw Ayano, Enraiha set up, aiming at her. Her eyes were serious.

"Don't you move, you evil fairy!"

"Kyaaa!"

The pair that started playing tag was strangely watched by Kazuma and Ren.

"She's so easy-going, really."

"Errr…Onii-sama, that is…"

"Ah, you were fortunate enough not to see it before. That's called a Pixie, a sinful living thing whose tiny body is loaded with cunning. If you get involved with it you will meet misfortune like a certain idiot, so be careful."

Kazuma's irresponsible explanation raised voices of protest full of anger. Two, to be exact.

"What are you saying!"

'"What are you saying!"'

At the complete harmony of voice and thought, Ren unintentionally sniggered. Controlling both of them trying to complain about it, Kazuma pointed forward.

"Well, the comical story ends here. That thing is still alive."

There, a Yuuji turned to stone tumbled. There was no indication of him starting to move but it seems he wasn't dead yet. The evidence for it were both his cut off arms that already connected and the wound from the diagonal slash was rapidly being closed. Ayano snorted her nose in dissatisfaction.

"Why did you fail killing him? Were you going easy on him?"

"It was unexpectedly tough. But that's not particularly troublesome."

Kazuma lightly shrugged his shoulders and molded a wind blade that will certainly kill him this time.

"Please wait. I am that person's opponent."

"You are? By yourself?"

Ren nodded twice.

For a short while Kazuma compared Ren and Yuuji, looking sullen, but as if being pushed back by Ren's determined face, he accepted that proposal.

Letting Ren down from his arms, Kazuma informed him shortly.

"Do your best."

"Yes!"

Ren vigorously replied and started walking towards Yuuji, whose body was still creaking, but after advancing a few steps he looked over his shoulder.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Say it.", Kazuma coolly nodded.

"Onii-sama, do you think you could die for the sake of protecting me?"

"No."

"Why is that?"

"Because my life is mine and mine alone. I wouldn't do it for anyone and burdening someone with it is unthinkable."

Without a speck of hesitation, Kazuma declared so.

"Beside, if I were to die while protecting you, that would be boring. Everyone might as well become happy."

"…"

After a few seconds of silence, Ren nodded expressing a really gentle smile.

"That's right. That's so right."

"I know right?"

"Yes! I'll be going now."

"All right."

Kazuma waved his hand at the running Ren, and focused his gaze on Ayano standing beside him.

"What…?"

Looking at Kazuma with a gaze full of meaning, Ayano asked with an even stronger doubtful look.

"No way - have you heard it all since the beginning?"

"What exactly?"

"…"

Of course, she understood that couldn't possibly be true. No matter what reason, Kazuma wouldn't overlook Ren when in danger.

Clearly Kazuma didn't know anything, and despite that, it seems he saw through everything and with merely a few words he disentangled Ren's bewilderment.

The moments you can sense the greatness of this man's capacity are always like this. In spite of his usual devil-may-care attitude, when it's important he's more reliable that anyone else.

If he were normally like this I…

She suddenly realized that Kazuma was still focusing on her. With a gaze full of wonder, as if seeing a new species.

While she herself was agitated to this extent, Kazuma seemed calmed in all respects. Finding that difference really irritating Ayano turned away in annoyance.

“How shitty.”

Part 4

“I thought something was weird - “

In response to the tsunami-like torrent of earth and sand that closed it, Ren used a high-density barrier that will protect only his circumference.

“I thought something was weird - “

The earth spears that tried to grow almost like snakes underneath his feet, he dodged with light back-steps. Just as he thought. Even if his brute strength was in a different league, his aim was off. He didn’t control the vast power newly obtained. If he were to use that gap, this was an opponent he could defeat.

“The uncomfortable feeling I couldn’t put into words. What was the meaning of it, I understand it now. Accepting to become the sacrifice is not strength. Throwing away your own self is not kindness. Your words are only trying to justify your own weakness!”

“Wh…at…!”

The stone face was warped in anger. The angry roar changed to shock wave, the ground and the atmosphere trembled.

"You're saying this is weakness in front of me!? Without the resolution to dirty your hands, without being able to decide what you should do, a brat whose only loitering around!?"

"If so, what are *you* doing? Do you think Mayumi-san will be glad to see you in this ugly shape?", Ren vehemently retorted.

"To protect someone is not to let them live. It is to not make them sad. It's to make them happy! Only for them to live, that's pointless!"

Let's all become happy - as a matter of course, Kazuma said so.

That's right, it was something obvious. Very ordinary, unsurprisingly mundane - because it was the most valuable, he made efforts to protect it.

"Is Mayumi-san the kind of person to survive as long as you become a sacrifice? Is she the kind of human being fine with being the only one to survive? If that's not true, if your existence has even a bit of value to her, than you can't die! You can't let her be burdened with your life!"

"Th- that's only whitewashing prattle!", Yuuji shouted entrusting it to anger but -

"A man who lost his sense of reality has no right to get in my way!", Ren retorted on the spot.

"<<There is no other method so it can't be helped.>> After all, that's what you are trying to say. Because there's no way out without a sacrifice I'm deceiving myself that not being afraid to become the sacrifice is strength. But - even so, I'm not OK with that!"

Right now, Ren is perfectly overpowering Yuuji. The Ren who embraces his ideal persistently and Yuuji who lost to reality trying to reach his goal to the utmost limit - the judgement on which one is correct we leave it to the individual but, as far as empty theory goes, Ren's side has more force.

"I - I won't let anyone become a sacrifice. Without loosing anything, I will protect everything - and then I will save Ayumi-chan!"

No matter how you look at it, the reckless discourse that doesn't seem at all practical but for some reason Yuuji felt like he lost the mental battle.

"Ohh - "

While viewing the battle between those two, whose eyes became strangely subdued, Kazuma quiet-

ly clapped his hands. And then, turned his attention on Ayano.

"So, Ayano - "

"What?"

"I demand an explanation of the situation. Why is our Ren-kun fighting the rock doll at this kind of place and it's forcing the grassy-smelling <<opinion of the young>> on it?"

"Rock doll you say…that's kind of a human…"

Kazuma unnaturally forced his eyes wide.

"That thing? That's an excellent shark skin you can see right there. Please teach him at least some skin care tricks."

"…"

Seeing Kazuma acting too much like he always does, spontaneously Ayano crouched down, greatly perplexed.

"…how should I say this, you're very good at spoiling such a serious atmosphere?"

"Flattery won't get you anywhere ."

"I'm not flattering you!"

The retort at full power was obviously ignored by Kazuma. Playing innocent in front of the previous conversation, he asked a second time.

" - so? "

"…to put it simply, Ren fell in love at first sight with the girl who will become the sacrifice. And now, he apparently decided he wants to save her."

Ayano roughly explained all that happened until now.

"Hmmm - did Ren reach such an age?"

Without thinking deeply enough Kazuma nodded but when he finally noticed his complexion changed.

"Which means…hey!? That thing - "

"He knows."

Ayano coldly controlled Kazuma's words.

"Both me and Ren, we know it all."

"Is that so?"

"That's right. That's why don't you ever say *that thing*. At least not in front of the kid."

"…"

Kazuma didn't reply.

A heavy silence was flowing.

The rock asked.

“Do you understand what are you saying?”

“I think so.”, the boy replied.

“Do you think you can do it?”

“I have no choice but to do it.”

The rock was silent. The boy too, had nothing more to say.

No, just one more thing.

“Please move aside.”, he told him quietly.

“I already lost my reason to fight with you anymore. Leave the rest to me.”

“That’s impossible.”, Yuuji coldly declared.

“The reason to fight didn’t change. To protect Ojousama I will kill you. No, I will kill all of you. That is my responsibility.”

“Why - “

“You’re noisy.”

Ren understood it was meaningless to repeat his words. It was impossible to change Yuuji’s will. For the sake of going forward he has no choice but to bring him down.

Resolving himself, Ren changed his stance. Yuuji too, polished his power for the sake of his strongest attack.

"If you are serious, defeat the likes of me with one blow. If you can't do it, it means all you said are thoughtless words."

Ren was quiet. He was concentrating on the enemy in front of him.

He must win. But just winning is not enough. To make his ideal reality, he need a superior power from the one until now.

Power - I want power.

At the same time, both thought the same thing. Because even their goal was the same, to reach a conclusion ordinary methods were mutually exclusive.

"!!"

"Oooaaaaaaa!!"

There was no need for a signal. As if mutually arranging it, both of them squeezed out the maximum level of power. A surging sea of earth and sand covered the field of vision. That was an overwhelming mass. The most steady <<power>> of this world.

The mountain is only one - it was something that descended all at once. It couldn't be opposed with a half-hearted flame.

As for Ren -

From the palms he pushed out, a flame of pale golden was released. Different from the usual dazzling radiance. It's color very pale, the flame was hazy as if the movement of the atmosphere could erase it.

The flame met the earth and almost like an illusion slipped through it.

The flickering flame definitely burned something inside Yuuji and came out through his back. And then, as a matter of course the stream of earth drew near Ren.

Gooouuuu!!

The wind knocked it all down.

"Good grief - ", Kazuma said with a bitter smile

"If you want to do such a thing say it first."

"It's because I was sure you will save me…"

Ren was furiously panting because of weariness but even so he showed a bright smile.

And then, only one person who had yet to understand the situation remained.

"Wa - wait - what happened just now?"

"…"

Staring at Ayano with a gaze full of eloquence, he ostentatiously sighted.

"Wh- what…?"

"You see, Ren changed that man and only purified the foreign element. Without affecting anything else."

"…eeh?"

"See for yourself."

Kazuma pointed at the fallen, unmoving Yuuji.

"He's still alive."

Looking at him, Yuuji's rock shell crumbled and from inside his human skin started to show.

Without a single damage to his body he was purified by something that only burned the negative influence, something that even Ayano couldn't use, the highest class of craft.

"Ren…did that?"

Looking at Ren full of wonder, at the kid she treated as her brother, the one she thought of as not yet half a man, she was embarrassed but still smiled proudly.

Kazuma looked down on Ayano with a smile carved from sarcasm.

"You, even if you succeeded Enraiha if you're slacking off Ren will take the position of the next Head from you. Or rather - if you were without Enraiha right now wouldn't Ren be the stronger one?"

"Th- that not true!!"

Ayano reflexively retorted but truthfully her self-confidence was pretty much shaken.

Before one knows…I can't be negligent around him…

She looked hard at Ren with half-opened eyes. Noticing that look, in a panic, Ren showed a forced smile.

"Ah…that's not true. I'm still no match for Onee-sama, yes."

"You're such a good kid."

While grinning, Kazuma gently patted Ren's hair. Ayano's eyes became dangerous once again.

"Ni- Nii-sama please don't provoke her!"

"Provoke her? I only said my honest impression but whatever. More importantly- "

Once again brushing Ren's head, Kazuma praised his brother with a serious look. Saying only this:

"You did well."

"Y- yes!"

Ren nodded with a delight shining in his sparkling eyes. But, his facial expression immediately tightened.

"But, this is not over, Nii-sama, Nee-sama!"

Including a firm determination, Ren looked at both of them. In silence both of them waited for the continuation.

"As I thought, I can't tolerate Ayumi-chan becoming a sacrifice. But using another sacrifice to appease Mt. Fuji is also unacceptable. That's why, I am thinking of defeating the origin of it all, the demon beast. So please lend me your power."

"Yeah."

Kazuma agreed very naturally. It almost seemed as if he didn't understand the situation, it was that kind of careless response.

Ayano starred into Ren's eyes and asked just to make sure.

"Do you understand what you're saying? To pick a fight with that?"

She pointed out ahead, where obviously there was a mountain. In a sense, the highest authority of Japan. 3776 meters above the sea level. Tall above all else in this country, an existence larger than anything else.

Having come this far, that greatness, mass, the existence itself was one power.

When looking up, everyone would think so. It's impossible to rival it - no. It's even impossible to fight it.

Climbing to the top of the mountain, people that pretend to have overcome it, there are plenty. But, that's just a big lie. No matter how many time humans tried to investigate the peak, stomping on it, kick at it, they moved back after only five centimeters of ascending and the mountain didn't move. It remained unchanged.

It's unthinkable to challenge it.

Very big, eternally rising above, the mountain stood there majestically. However -

"That's right. Do you have any questions?"

Even knowing that reality, Ren's decision didn't change. Ayano looked at Ren, looked at the mountain for a second time, and shook her head as if resigned.

"There's no helping it. I'll keep you company. I'll teach the mountain's spirit the fact that Enraiha burns through everything."

"I'm so glad you brought something good."

"Just shut up already!"

At Kazuma's sobering response, Ayano unsheathed Enraiha and tried to hit him with a horizontal mow.

With a bitter smile, Ren started giving directions to his brother and sister who like always started their comic duo.

"Well, let's continue. If we don't hurry the ceremony will begin."

Ayumi-chan, wait for me. Because I am coming to rescue you.

Shouldering a solid determination Ren stepped forward to the center of the mansion.

Chapter 6: Confession Underneath The Moonlight

Part 1

"…oh."

Suddenly Kureha looked up at the sky. Before her eyes there was nothing but interminable rough stone. But, seeing something there, her lips raised faintly and she murmured slowly.

"He was unexpectedly fragile. I wanted him to at least deal with that child called Ren."

Advancing at most ten steps, Ren looked over his shoulder. With an awkward face he wanted to ask those two behind him a question.

"…so where are we supposed to go?"

"…supposed to?"

Without giving it any thought Ayano discarded Kazuma's question.

Together with a heavy sigh Kazuma asked them.

"…you two, what the heck did you come here for?"

“Well you see, we came here on the spur of the moment. We didn’t have time to investigate.”

“That’s no reason, stupid.”, Kazuma said in a cold manner.

And then he started to walk in front.

“Do you know where to?”

“More or less.”

Last night he confirmed Ayumi’s silhouette. It wasn’t difficult to follow that presence.

After walking a few minutes, guided by the voice of the wind, the trio came to the deepest part of the mansion, in front of the cave shrine.

“Welcome to our family’s greatest sanctuary.”

A soft alto welcomed them. A single beautiful woman, who could only be called bewitching, stood there and behind here five subordinate Chijutsushi.

“Hi. Thanks for yesterday.”

Kazuma greeted her in a relaxed manner and returned the Chijutsushi’s gaze, full of hatred.

But to the last Kureha was full of courtesy - or maybe rudely courteous - when asking about their business.

“Can I ask you what business do you have here?”

"So she said."

Kazuma looked at Ren. Ren took a step forward, faced the group of Chijutsushi and boldly declared.

"I came to save Ayumi-chan."

"…and instead of her to let Mayumi become a sacrifice?"

"No. We won't allow the ceremony to happen. The three of us will defeat the demon beast sleeping inside Mt. Fuji."

"…"

As expected that was surprising enough for Kureha's eyes to become round. But she straightened her attitude in a second and admonished Ren like an adult would a helpless child.

"Boy - you would be better learning how to look at reality more closely."

"I am looking. At the very least more than you.", retorted Ren with no hesitation.

"Letting the sacrificing continue for three hundred years and labeling it as <<It can't be helped>> it seems much more strange to me. I won't let you do it any further. I won't allow it! Absolutely!"

Pressed down by Ren's vigor and strong declaration, the Chijutsushi backed off. But, Kureha - the one that didn't move an inch from that place looked down on the boy and fearlessly laughed.

"I see - that's like saying there's no more room for discussion - well then - let's start shall we?"



As if encouraged by Kureha's composure, the Chijutsushi started to prepare for battle. In response to it, so did Kazuma's side.

Unsheathing Enraiha, Ayano shouted:

"Ren, ignore the small fry! Match me!"

"Yes!"

Ayano and Ren let out fireballs simultaneously aiming at Kureha. Even though it was far inferior to their real power, the people who could oppose it were a very select category.

But even when faced with such a calorific value, Kureha didn't lose her smile.

"Fu fu…"

Without moving even a finger, it was clear she didn't use her power. But, the fireballs aiming at her described an arc, as if avoiding her and parted left and right. Shrinking as if crushed, they split open.

"Wha…?"

Kureha started taunting Ayano in mute amazement.

"Is this the famous Kannagi flame from the stories? How very lukewarm, huh?"

A cold sweat followed the muscles along the spine. It was entirely impossible to tell what happened. She had no counter-plan for it. She could elevate the calorific value further but will that work?

"I saw it yesterday too - you have a very curious technique. You, are you really a Chijutsushi?"

From Ayano's back, feeling disturbed, a voice that kept it's cool reached. Always calm and steady in all respects, a low voice that she grew accustomed to hear.

"Kazuma!? What did just happen?"

Casually controlling Ayano's question, Kazuma started walking.

"That ability, did you receive it together with your power?"

"…"

Easily divulging her most important secret, for one moment, Kureha opened her eyes wide. But she immediately regained her composure and expressed a suspicious and somewhat transcendental smile.

"True, if you saw Yuuji's shape, it's no wonder you saw through me. But that was wrong. Because I was born with it, you see."

Stopping without changing her posture, Kureha talked indifferently.

"Without being able to manipulate even a grain of sand, the one who can't hear the voice of spirits, I can on the contrary use this. A unique power. Because of it, Father hated me very much. All the more because it was so strong."

"Even when that strong, did you desire even more power?"

"For someone who plans on becoming a sorcerer, don't you think that's a natural desire?"

"…I think that depends on the power."

Ayano was unable to follow those two's indifferent exchange. She couldn't understand the omitted parts from their own self-evident truth.

"Hey!"

Finally loosing her patience Ayano pulled the hem of Kazuma's jacket.

"Explain. What is Kureha's power?"

Requesting it in a tentatively small voice, in her own way she tried to pay attention not to spoil the mood. But it wasn't effective.

Kazuma had a truthfully annoyed face, that only changed when seeing Ren's expression, standing next to Ayano, asking the same question.

"It's the control of gravity."

"…the control…of gravity…", Ayano repeated once more, amazed.

It's not like she didn't understand the meaning of the words. But -

"Why is a Chijutsushi able to do that?"

The phenomena caused by the Spirit Magic were exceedingly pragmatic. For a Enjuthushi flame, for a Chijutsushi soil and stone - they are able to manipulate such things.

Surely, if one presumed gravity was an adaptation of the four elements, it would be a symbol of the <<Earth>> attribute but the Spirit magic doesn't handle such general concept like symbols.

While it may be true that the flame is the symbol of destruction and regeneration, an Enjutsushi that is able to manifest a <<Healing Flame>> has yet to appear.

Although it wasn't unreasonable for Ayano to be surprised, Kazuma completely discarded such considerations.

"It can't be helped if you thought so before this. But accept the reality in front of you."

"Well, you could say that…", Ayano mumbled insecure.

Being the opponent of gravity, an invisible power, she didn't have the slightest idea on how to fight it.

"You must start by recognizing the distortions in space. Don't see it with your eyes and don't think about it. Just feel it."

"Don't say such even-before-the-first-generation-of-battle-manga lines…"

Ayano was sulking but Kazuma didn't really pay attention to her. Shifting his focus on Kureha, he said:

"We don't have time to carefully work over the battle plan, you know right? Because the other side is trying to waste time."

Ayano too observed Kureha. In all this time they were conversing, no matter how much opportunities she had for attacking she didn't and only stood in

front of the shrine. As if she doesn't proactively want to fight.

Is she buying time? For the Tsuwabuki people to do so, there can only be one reason.

"Then, the ceremony is already…"

"Correct, it's about time for it to begin."

"Is- isn't this really bad? I need to hurry!", Ren shouted, completely changing his facial expression.

Lightly knocking his head to calm down, Kazuma laughed.

"That's true. You must hurry. That's why, a little unreasonableness can't be helped, right?"

Faced with Kazuma's smile, that no matter how you look at it was scheming, Ren unintentionally backed off. Unwilling to break his commitment, he chose some prudent words.

"Killing is absolutely no good."

No one will become a sacrifice - if he couldn't keep that promise, saving Ayumi will have lost its meaning. It's not a question of finishing it with <<It can't be helped>>.

"That's fine, the one to experience hardships is only you."

"Ehh…me?"

Without answering back, Kazuma lifted Ren by grabbing him by the collar. He held him aloft with all his power.

"Ni- Nii-sama!?"

"Gooooooooooooo!!"

He threw him violently. The small body wrapped in wind, instantly reached a speed of two hundred kilometers and before any of the Chijutsushi had time to react, reached the small shrine and disappeared inside the cave.

"Uuuuaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!"

From inside the cave, the boy's shrieks, reverberating over and over could be heard.

"…"

Friend or foe regardless, they all stared dumbfounded at the interior of the shrine and only Kazuma threw his chest out with pride.

"Excellent, it turned out well."

"Wait a secooooooond!", shouted Ayano after coming to her senses.

"What is it?"

"Don't you <<What is it?>> me!! Why are you being so reckless!?"

As Ayano's hands grabbed him by the collar and shook him with an almost magical skill, Kazuma laughed with an endlessly superficial smile.

"Ah! Isn't it fine? I made sure to harden the defenses."

"Even so, with that unreasonable speed!?"

"It can't be helped right? If he was any slower, he might have been shot down. I'm telling you not to worry, he may feel faint but I made it so he won't get hurt."

"…really? In that case it's fine…"

But if Ren were to hear those words, no matter how gentle a child he is, he would have complained in a big voice.

"Where is the part I *may feel faintttttttttt*…?"

Part 2

"Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!"

Together with that scream, Ren landed right in the center of that ceremonial place. That is, he crashed there.

The Chijutsushi that were just about to start the ceremony watched in a daze how a boy was suspended right before the technique's focal point and then he fell over with a grumbling sound.

Lying face down as if prostrating, Ren didn't even twitch.

Is he dead? At the time the Chijutsushi started to think so, his fingertips began moving as if convulsing and then, while weakly shaking his head, he got up.

"…ugh."

Nii-sama…this was a bit overdone…

The scream that was turned against the entire world, because of the crash's intensity, couldn't come out. Adjusting his breathing, he firmly held to his consciousness in order for it not to fly away.

From all of Ren's personal experience it wasn't something that could be easily be brushed off as *It*

made me somewhat dizzy. Only comparing it with ten times the speed of a roller-coaster gives maybe a similar feel..

The barrier of wind flawlessly protected the body from wounds but did nothing to improve the riding experience. In the middle of the ride while rebounding from wall to wall and ground to ceiling, rotating vertically, rotating horizontally, spinning, he was entirely exhausted by the complex 3D maneuver.

"No…no more…I'll vomit…"

While his semicircular canals had yet to recover, his brain gave him a shaking feeling, as if the earth was undulating. His stomach was convulsing and from inside his mouth, a regurgitating movement was trying to start.

It was at that time when that voice made his ears shook.

"…Ren?"

"…!"

An impossible to confuse, soft voice. More precious than anyone or anything, remembering her elegantly simple smiling face, Ren stood up despite the pain. In front of her, it's impossible to be more dis-

graceful than this. Controlling his nausea with desperate effort, he slowly raised his face.

Only a few centimeters away - literally in front of him, she was there. It seems she was fully dressed for the sacrifice, wearing a red hakama and a white coat, the typical costume of a shrine maiden. Her hair was loose, naturally overflowing.

"Aaaah - how beautiful…"

Forgetting his situation, Ren became fascinated with her. For him there was the one and only - Tsuwabuki Ayumi's figure.

"Why…are you here?"

Towards Ayumi inquiring so in bewilderment, Ren extended a hand, smiling. He naturally informed her of the natural conclusion.

"I came to save you."

"Ren…"

With a bitter facial expression, Ayumi slowly shook her head. She turned away, as if refusing the extended hand.

"No. I must carry on my mission. It's impossible to run away."

A clear refusal. But even so, Ren didn't withdraw his hand.

"Yes, I know. But that's been solved. Because I'll defeat the demon beast myself."

"…eh?"

Almost as if she didn't comprehend what he said, Ayumi opened her eyes wide. After a few seconds, when her eyes were full of understanding, she promptly doubt it and then she switched to negation.

"That sort of thing…it's impossible."

"I can do it."

With a quiet self-confidence, Ren declared so.

"For me alone it would be impossible to do but Nii-sama and Nee-sama are lending me their power. If it's those two, no matter what they deal with, they won't lose. They will surely win."

"But - but - !!"

For some reason having the attitude of a cornered person, Ayumi searched for words of rejection.

"What will it happen if you lose? Mt. Fuji will erupt, you know! I would rather die than see that! Because you see, from the beginning I was made for that purpose!"

"That sort of thing is not worth worrying about."

"…eh?"

"You see, this is something Nee-sama told me but…"

With that introduction, Ren asked the big question.

"What do *you* want to do?"

"…!!"

"Whether it's for the sake of everyone else, or duty, or the reason of your existence, you shouldn't concern yourself with such things. What do *you* want to do? What do *you* desire? Tell me your wish."

"Eehh, I - I want…"

Decide by yourself the path you want to follow - that kind of thinking was a foreign concept for Ayumi.

From the moment she was made, a fixed road with no place for divergence was pointed out for her. She never thought of getting off it.

The self that will become a sacrifice no matter what. Imagining that, Ayumi remembered she was reminded of an uneasy feeling close to horror. A dread that shook the very root of the meaning of her existence. Comparing it to the fear of loosing her life in the ceremony, that's not even close. Because the concept

called death is nothing more than the proof of accomplishing the task bestowed upon her.

"Before coming here I met Yuuji-san."

"For the sake of protecting Mayumi-san, Yuuji-san shed away his humanity. Literally throwing everything away, all for the sake of holding me back. A fighter throwing away his life is certainly strong. But. "

Remembering the strength of Yuuji's grotesque form, Ren shuddered. When thinking of the power difference it seems right to say that winning was nothing short of a miracle.

"Frankly, I was overwhelmed. I thought that such a human prepared to go that far for the sake of protecting a precious person was really amazing. But - that was wrong."

That was maybe one of the possible answers. Rather than throwing away one's ideals and loosing everything, maybe that was the better choice. But, even so.

"The happiness made of someone else's sacrifice is turned to sorrow. You can't feel delight only by yourself. At the very least, I do not wish for that. I want to choose another path."

Not to sacrifice everything else for the sake of the important, not to throw away the self -

Without loosing anything, for everyone to become happy - he definitely thinks such a dream-like path exists.

“I will protect you. I will protect you and all that you want to protect. So please, don’t give up.”

“Ren - “

As if the held out hand was inviting her, Ayumi took a step forward. But -

“We won’t let you!”

Together with unrefined voices, stone spears appeared in the space in between as if to separate them.

With eyes that held no emotion Ren turned in the direction of the voice.

“How long do you think we would listen to your foolish jokes? We won’t let a brat like you get in the way of our family’s holiest ceremony. While we lament the foolishness of challenging Chijutsushi so deep underground we will destroy you even if you don’t resist.”

The practitioners possible representative, the oldest one, gave the execution order in an antique speaking-style.

In response to that voice, the Chijutsushi prepared their attack. Ren starred at the offensive approaching from every direction with bored looking eyes.

One moment. The downpour of stones from overhead, the fangs rapidly growing from the ground, were instantly all burned to nothing.

"Wh - wha…"

"Hey - "

Facing the Chijutsushi prepared to flee after the failure of the one-kill attack, Ren informed them full of irritation.

"I'm sorry but right now I'm in the middle of a once in a lifetime confession. Can't you please not get in the way?"

"…"

That was equivalent with *I think nothing of you* but no one complained. To the point of foolishness, the overwhelming difference in power sealed all objection.

"Well then, let's start again."

Comfortably accepting the following silence, Ren extended his hand a second time.

"Will you trust in me?"

"…"

Maybe because she didn't really have time to think about it, Ayumi didn't instantly take Ren's hand.

"Why?"

She asked in a somewhat blaming, tough tone.

"Why do you go to such lengths? Even without the ceremony I will still die, you know?"

"But that doesn't mean you want to die right now, no?", Ren replied instantly.

"If there's not much time left anyway, then you should live fully all the more. No matter what you wish for, I will make it happen. I will take you wherever you want to go. That's why…that's why - "

Mustering all his strength, Ren took the final step. He took Ayumi's hand and then told her:

"Even if it's just one month, even if it's just one week, will you live together with me?"

Ayumi's eyes became round, and the next second her face was dyed bright red. A few seconds later Ren also realized the meaning of his words.

A- awkward

He was too forward. This was almost like a proposal. It left a love confession far behind.

"W- wro- this is, well…"

Ren's hand that in confusion tried to move away, Ayumi grasped it firmly and didn't let go.

Her eyes were full of tears like she couldn't suppress her happiness and she teasingly asked, smiling while crying.

"Is that wrong?"

Ren immediately tried to suppress his struggling heart. Returning the grip to the hand that held his, he looked straight into Ayumi's eyes.

"No it's not.", he declared.

"We will be together all the time. Until the absolute last second, we will never part ways."

Moved to tears, Ayumi nodded too.

"Yes. I want to live. I want to live together with Ren."

"Ayumi-chan."

Ren firmly hugged the girl's body. The skin's temperature transmitted by their touching skin gave them a unity, of becoming one.

Never to part again - they swore a second time.

But there is no time to stay embraced for as long as they like. A few minutes after, although reluctant Ren ended the hug and smiled at Ayumi.

"Well then, let's go. Onii-sama and Onee-sama are waiting."

"That's right."

He heard the answer from the back. In front of Ren's eyes, turning back in horror, the shadow of a person that couldn't possibly be there appeared.

"Ni- Nii-sama!? Why are you here?"

"…onii-san?"

Ignoring Ren's shout, Kazuma lightly greeted Ayumi.

"I'm this guy's brother Kazuma. Nice meeting you. If you like I don't mind you calling me brother in law."

"Onii-sama!"

"Ah, my name is Tsuwabuki Ayumi. Even though I may be inexperienced, please treat me well."

"Ayumi-chan!"

Ren shouted with a bright red face, but Ayumi bowed her head with a serious expression.

"In such occasions, isn't this the proper greeting?"

"True but it's not like that - enough of this!"

While scratching his head, Ren glared at Kazuma.

"…since when have you been watching?"

"From the <<What do *you* want to do?>> part."

That's almost since the beginning. Understanding he heard all about his embarrassing confession, Ren's face was full of shame.

Huh?

Suddenly feeling a sense of discomfort, he looked around. There's nothing else. There's *no one* else. Except for Kazuma.

"Where is Nee-sama?"

"Ah, because she's so heroic she's detaining Kureha by herself."

Ren was not such a foolish boy as to take those words seriously. Changing the distrustful glance to one of blame, he stared at his brother.

"Did you use her as bait *again*?"

He stressed the word again with all his power but of course Kazuma is impervious to that degree of cynicism.

"Oi, oi,*again* is not right. If you say it like that, it's it almost as if I'm using Ayano."

"…is that wrong?"

"Of course it's wrong.", Kazuma declared while puffing out his chest.

It was a magnificent attitude as if saying *There's nothing I need to be ashamed of*.

Although definitely not agreeing with this, Ren gave up investigating. He said in a resigned tone.

"Let's return quickly. I'm worried about Nee-sama."

"Certainly, I agree leaving this gloomy stinking place."

Answering in a subtle different focus, Kazuma had the same opinion. But before they began running, Ayumi pulled away her hand from Ren's.

"Please wait! We need to save Mayumi-sama!"

"What do you mean?", asked Ren without understanding the meaning.

"Yesterday suddenly Kureha-sama suggested that Mayumi-sama should participate in the ceremony too. That with two people, a much stronger seal can be performed."

"…what's that?"

It was a strange story. From the start, Ayumi was the sacrifice made so that Mayumi will live. Even if it was for the sake of a stronger seal, this was like putting the cart before the horse.

"I too thought it was strange, but right now, there is no one who can go against Kureha-sama."

The Head, Iwao, fell to bed due to illness, Kureha sized all authority, Ayumi roughly explained.

But, Kazuma totally ignored the circumstance of the Tsuwabuki family and only asked what's necessary.

"Well, that sort of thing is inconsequential. So, where is that Mayumi?"

"Right there."

Ayumi pointed at the faintly sparkling crystal pillar. Ren and Kazuma stared with wonder at Mayumi sealed inside it.

"What a beautiful thing."

"I don't think that relevant…so, how are we getting it out of there?"

"Well, because Kureha-sama doesn't have the ability, I think someone else did it…"

"I see."

Kazuma nodded, turned his eyes on one the Chijutsushi standing there petrified and arrogantly commanded him.

"Do it. If you obey I won't 80% kill you, I'll drop it to 50%."

"Do- don't screw arou- kyaa!"

The man could't finish those courageous words of resistance. The atmosphere turned rigid as the man's face was hit and his nose sunk ten centimeters into his cranium.

"…is this an 80% kill?"

"Don't be stupid. That was just because he talked back to me."

Kazuma replied to Ren's question, in a stunned expression, lightly shrugging his shoulders.

"It can't be helped. It's troublesome asking each and everyone of them so I'll do it."

Please?

Before one realized he unbelievably said such a thing, dangerous even from a layman's point of view.

"Can you do it?"

"Leave it to me. The likes of a crystal is trivial."

"Eh…wait, that is- "

Ayumi tried to say something but without minding her Kazuma released the wind blades.

Above Mayumi's head and underneath her feet, two wind blades smoothly cut through the crystal as if it were glass.

The crystal mass slipped off in accordance with the diagonal cross-section. Furthermore, Kazuma cut that too.

Without injuring the body inside, the wind blades scrapped off only the crystal. By the time she fell to the ground, there wasn't even a fragment of crystal sticking to Mayumi's body.

"As expected of Nii-sama! This was amazing, righ- "

Ren was cheering in a loud voice but when watching Ayumi's paper-white face, his words were interrupted.

While having an extremely bad premonition, he asked.

"What's the matter?"

"…that crystal pillar was the pillar supporting this cave."

For some reason, Ren turned his head around and looked at the crystal pillar. At the now completely-cut-in-the-center pillar.

Because of what happened, it's impossible for it to function like a pillar anymore.

"We…el, that means- "

Feeling her lungs with air, Ayumi screamed.

"It's collapsing!!"

As if starting with her shout, the ceiling cave started shaking with an ominous rumble. Rocks of various sizes started raining down from the ceiling, and cracks appeared on the walls.

Ren shouted with a changed expression.

"Ni- Nii-sama! Quickly let's run…!"

"Hmm…,what to do?", Kazuma murmured totally calm.

"That cave was really long. I don't doubt that if we run we'll be buried long before reaching the ground."

"Then what do you suppose we should do?"

"That's right, first of all - it's noisy!"

He looked up annoyed and only that, the falling rocks stopped. The earth tremor too grew remarkably quiet.

Looking up at the ceiling, Ayumi's eyes ogled in shock.

"Did you stop the cave-in with wind? No way, we're a hundred meters underground!"

"It's not like my powers stop working a hundred meters underground, you know?"

Kiiiiiiiiiiii!

"Waaaah?"

"Kyaaa!"

Together with Kazuma's words, a violent buzzing in the ear reached Ren and Ayumi.

Seeing them press their ears in anguish, Kazuma somewhat beckoned them.

"Come a little bit closer. It's bothersome spreading two more barriers."

Standing next to Kazuma, the buzzing incredibly calmed down. Ren asked in wonder.

"What did you do?"

"There's not enough volume of air, so I'm increasing it"

"You're increasing it?"

Thinking about how could one increase the atmosphere in an enclosed space, there's no way to do it but

increase the atmospheric pressure.It means that the buzzing from some time ago was the result of the eardrum being pressed. All the Chijutsushi collapsed.

"Hey…doesn't it seem there are people fainting in agony with blood poring from their ears?"

"That's because if you suddenly increase the atmospheric pressure ten times, at least the eardrums will be torn."

As he thought, Kazuma didn't care about the health of the Chijutsushi. He respected Ren's request and was careful not to kill them but except for that he really didn't care.

It's fine as long as the heart keeps beating., that kind of feeling.

Experiencing a much more ominous feeling than the one when the cave-in happened, Ren asked.

" -So, what are you going to do now?"

"It's settled. We're going above ground. By taking the shortest distance!"

the shortest distance?

Ren looked up at the ceiling. Understanding what he wanted to do with all the build-up atmospheric pressure, his ominous feelings changed to certainty.

With no hesitation, Kazuma released wind. To the shortest distance, right above their head.

Like a rushing stream the atmosphere pierced the hundred meter thick bedrock almost like paper.

Pulverized and minced, the fragments of rock under pressure were blown by he wind.

Ren looked up at the skies. Already without ceiling he could see the twinkling stars high in the sky.

He looked down. He didn't see the shadows nor the bodies of the Chijutsushi that were supposed to tumble on the ground. Being swallowed in Kazuma's wind, they were flying here and there in space.

Maybe they became man-made-satellites. Leaving the joke aside, Ren seriously thought so.

"…was there a need to go so far?"

"I wonder. First of all, this was the quickest and easiest way.", Kazuma stated calmly without showing a particle of introspection.

"Let's get out already. There's no more fun to be here."

"…that so?"

Leaving out the pointless complaints, Ren agreed in a worn-out voice.

By riding on the wind they appeared right in the mist of the sea of trees. Although it goes without saying what was the reason for the mowed down trees around them, the view was still nice.

"We came out quite a long way off. Well then, Ayano is- "

Just when Kazuma was saying that, a pillar of fire rose approximately a kilometer away from them. Kazuma and Ren exchanged glances difficult to express.

"…well, at least she's easy to find huh?"

"…right."

Exchanging a dry smile, they avoided sour criticism beyond that.

"Well then, let's meet up first."

"That's fine and all, but did you think about a proper explanation? I'm sure she's really angry."

"You worry too much. You'll go bald in the future."

"And who do you thing is adding up to my worries?", Ren screamed with so much grief, he didn't seem an elementary school student at all.

Seeming to enjoy herself, Ayumi watched close that charming exchange.

"…kuu…it…huurts…"

In a place a little separated from the trio that, at the same time, were harmoniously smiling at each other, with a pain assailing her entire body, Mayumi finally regained her consciousness.

Having been swallowed up by the violent air current and raised at once from a hundred meters in the ground to a hundred meters above surface, at last, she was thrown as a result into the ground because of gravity.

No matter how much protection she received from the Ground Spirits, they couldn't nullify this kind of damage.

Although a normal human's body would have been scattered in pieces, but she didn't even fracture her bones showed that a direct descendant of Tsuwabuki was a different kind of thing altogether.

"I wonder, is Yuuji safe?…and Onee-sama, what is she planning…"

The time she was sealed into the crystal was almost like a long dream but she was generally conscious. She somewhat understood what happened.

But even so, she didn't grasp Kureha's real intentions.

"A two people seal, what will that accomplish? If Father were to know of such a thing- "

In front of Mayumi, raising up her upper body, a huge piece of rock tumbled. Although it was a commonplace rock, for some reason it weighted on her mind so she looked at it carefully.

Perceiving her reason for her sense of discomfort, Mayumi grimaced. On the surface of the rock, the face of an anguished man was carved. Plus-

"What's this, what bad taste…wait, is this Father's? Who sculpted this?"

Raising an indignant shout, Mayumi was about to smash the sculpture, letting anger take its course.

But a small voice stopped her.

"…yumi…Mayumi…"

"Eh?"

Being called out by the rock sculpture, that was a rare experience even for a Chijutsushi so unintentionally she froze.

"F…ath..er, no way…no way…is that really you Father…?"

As if answering that call, the sculpture opened its eyes. He glared at Mayumi with a distorted and cracked face.

"Mayumi…stop, Kureha…"

"Onee-sama? What do you mean Father? Father, is that really you? Why are you like th- "

"Stop Kureha…! To maintain the family's pride, you must…"

In a state he couldn't even hear his beloved daughter's voice, Iwao tried to get up. With a sublime expression, as if he was seeing death, Mayumi could do nothing but look at him in a daze.

Part 3

"Haaa!"

With Enraiha, Ayano split apart the gravitational field drawing near her. And simultaneously she *burned* the stretched out distorted space that was enveloping her.

"Good grief.", Kureha murmured as if amazed.

"To burn a gravitational field, no, the space itself, what a lack of common sense!"

"I don't want to hear that from a Chijutsushi that can manipulate gravitation.", Ayano retorted in a cool manner.

"I won't let you go further!"

Their standpoints became their exact opposite. To protect the cave's entrance, the place where Ren and the annoying Kazuma sneaked in, was now Ayano's duty.

Kureha's five companions, the Chijutsushi went after them but Ayano was not really concerned about that. Rather she thought it was better if she can only concentrate on Kureha.

Thanks to that she was now becoming fairly accustomed to burning space.

Without being able to use her vision she used her sensitivity to grasp the signs around her and to hold out until those two came back.

"Just come back already stupid!"

While boos replaced her fighting spirit, Ayano released fireballs. In order to match that Kureha shot gravitational fields.

That was the exact moment Kazuma came back.

Both the gravitation field able to compress a human to the size of a fist and the red-hot blaze that burns humans to nothingness turned into a fatal blow, attacking Kazuma from the front and back.

"Yo- you idiot!", screamed Ayano.

But in front of her-

A wind blade cut down both attacks in one go.

"Yo. Did you wait?", asked Kazuma as if nothing happened.

While holding with both hands Ren and Ayumi.

…you monster.,Ayano said voicelessly.

Even though it was for an instant, feeling worried for him seemed foolish.

"First of all, why don't you let those kids down?"

"Hmm? Ah, that's right."

Kazuma bent over a little and dropped down those two he was holding under his arms.

That small moment his glance strayed, Ayano quickly filled the space between.

"N— Nii-sama!"

"…Oh?"

Receiving Ren's warning he raised his face. Right before his eyes Ayano was holding Enraiha aloft.

Kazuma moved his body to the left evading the attack and grasped Ayano's wrist, trying to swing downward.

Catching Ayano's gaze, burning in anger from the front, he said.

"That's a pretty dangerous welcome. Instead of saying <<Welcome back!>> is Kannagi-san's home proper etiquette to hit someone in the head?"

"You're always always always always- "

Without responding to Kazuma's persiflage, Ayano squeezed out words from the gap between her teeth.

"You're always pushing out the troublesome stuff to me! Just die already!"

Her jumping right foot described a sharp arc. Kazuma lightly bent backwards and dodged the rotating kick that was about to hit his jaw.

"You should stop doing high kicks in a skirt. You're a woman from the biological point of view, right?"

"How fussy! Just let me hit you once!"

"Even though *you* tried to hit me!"

"Ahem- o(-"-;)"

Unnaturally someone cleared his throat restraining these two were caught up in their usual mood. That was Ren.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your enjoyment but please leave it at that for today. You're frightening Ayumi-chan and above all, this is not over!"

At once they turned to the same spot together. To where Tsuwabuki Kureha was starring back with a stunned expression.

"You're lacking too much tension. Do you still believe you can win?"

"Something like that.", Kazuma replied matter of course.

"I released both would-be sacrifices. If you're goal was to execute the ceremony, that already became impossible."

"Is that so? It they were snatched away all I have to do is take them back. That's all."

"Do you plan on defeating all three of us? I think that in this country the only *human* capable is someone of Kannagi Juugo's level."

At Kazuma's weird speaking style, Ayano asked from the back.

"Hey, you found something out while pursuing Ren, right? If you did, just say it already!"

"Oh, is that true?"

Ren thought he didn't simply come just to spy on him. Kureha too waited with great interest for Kazuma's reply.

"There's nothing to be found out."

Acting all important, Kazuma folded his arms.

"About Kureha's aim, I don't know it even now. But I know what is the source of supply for her power."

"Source of supply?"

"That's right. From where did she get her hands on it, how did she hand it out to Yuuji. The existence that

is the origin of the unusual talent improper for a Chijutsushi- “

At those last words Kureha visibly frowned.

“I believe I told I had this power since I had been born.”

“Since you were born?”

At Kureha’s words, Kazuma laughed scornfully.

“And you didn’t try to explain it? What can alter a Chijutsushi so that she is able to control gravity? You’re not a Chijutsushi. On the contrary, I think you’re not human!”

“…”

Kureha glared at Kazuma with a grim face. Even an outsider could see she’s disturbed. All the composure she’s shown so far seemed to have disappeared somewhere.

Even so, when she showed a forced smile she urged Kazuma to keep on going.

“Isn’t that interesting? Then by all means tell me what you think. My own secret I don’t even know.”

“That is- “

At the time when everyone was getting ready to hear Kazuma’s words-

Countless stone spears raised from the ground. They interrupted Kazuma's speech but didn't reach them. Their aim was only one and that was Kureha.

"…!!"

Nimbly chasing Kureha who escaped into the air, while writhing like snakes the stone spears reached for the sky. But, the attack that let the chance of certain-kill escape didn't have power to destroy Kureha. The gravity's hand caught the spears and crushed them all at once.

"What are you trying to do?"

Lightly dancing in space, Kureha asked quietly. There's no disturbance about her. Without even asking, she understands everything - that's the kind of face she's making.

"Aren't you attacking the wrong side Mayumi?"

While talking as if gossiping, Kureha smashed one of the closer trees.

From the shade of the ruined trees caught up in the attack, a single girl appeared.

If one were to remove the age difference, its facial features were identical to Ayumi. But that pupil

burned with the fire of hatred, something Ayumi is not capable of.

It was the eldest child of the Tsuwabuki family, Ayumi's blueprint, Tsuwabuki Mayumi.

"Ma- Mayumi-sama…?", Ayumi murmured in a daze, without understanding the situation.

Did she just become their ally?

"Look, Ayumi is right there. Catch her quickly and resume the ceremony."

"Shut up, you betrayer!"

As if instigated by her sister's words, Mayumi interrupted her with a refusal. Her eyes beyond anger she said in a crushed to death tone.

"Father is dead."

"Really?"

Silent for just one moment, Kureha bowed her hand dully.

"*Really?* Is that all? Is that all you have to say for the father you raised your hand against?"

"He challenged me so I defeated him. That's all there is to it.", said Kureha over her shoulder, thoroughly indifferent.

"You're only blaming me but you don't think anything about the father trying to kill his daughter?"

"What shameless things are you saying? If I consider all your schemes, I won't complain about killing you a hundred times over!"

"Is that so? If you were the one scheming, do you think Father would have killed you?"

"…what are you trying to say?"

"Nothing much. It's just tedious talk. It doesn't mean anything. -So, what will you do?", Kureha inquired as if asking what does her sister want for lunch.

Excessively serene, so unconcerned she didn't seem to ask about a life or death choice.

"What, you ask."

"Dying meaninglessly if you attack me or accomplish the family's duty with me, I'm asking you to choose one."

"Wha- "

For a moment Mayumi was at a loss of words but she became so angry her body trembled.

"The family's duty? Are you, are *you* really saying those words?"

"I'm not asking for your opinion. I'm asking for your answer. Hurry up and choose."

"Don't…joke with me!"

Together with an angry roar, the stone spears from underground are stretching and attacking Kureha. Without even looking, Kureha crushed them but Mayumi couldn't understand the simple-mindedness of her attack.

"For the honor of the Tsuwabuki family! Kureha! I'm bringing judgement upon you! Prepare yourself!"

"…what an idiotic child."

Letting out a dry murmur, Kureha locked her sister in a gravity barrier.

Although worried about the aftermath, the spherical barrier with a two meter diameter was contracted one centimeter. There's no way to escape.

But just before that, a wind gale destroyed the gravity barrier and blew up the insides.

"Kyaaa!?"

Mayumi mercilessly got blown by the wind and landed face first on the ground.

"Wh- what…?"

Stepping up in front of the surprised Mayumi, he looked down on her as if he was coercing her.

"You can kill yourself if you want to, but before that I need some answers. What is Kureha's purpose?"

"Why would I tell- "

Kazuma stepped on the ground with all his strength right next to Mayumi's head. His shoe sole pulverized the hard rock-bed, his shoe print engraved one centimeter deep.

He said unconcerned to Mayumi's stiff face.

"Is protecting that information valuable enough for me to step on your head and break your skull?"

Now that he said it, there was no merit to hold on the information. Her rejection was nothing more but her disposition.

"Kureha's purpose is- ", she said in a sulky tone, already without calling her sister.

"To make all of the Demon Beast's power her own."

" -!!"

Ayano, Ren, Ayumi all opened their eyes in shock. But Kazuma, at least on the surface, didn't show a particle of disturbance.

"…the two-layer seal, the power divided three-way - I see, so that's how it is?"

He murmured something, nodded his head in understanding but Mayumi, the one who told him, was the one looking up at Kazuma astonished.

"Did- did you figured it out just by hearing that?"

"Not really, I don't think I understood everything. I have no interest in something like the circumstance of your family. But I understood pretty much all I wanted to."

"I don't understand.", Ayano interrupted the conversation drawing close to Kazuma.

"What is it? Explain yourself."

"Just this and that- "

Shrugging his shoulders Kazuma started a broad explanation.

"Kureha's aim is to obtain the huge power of the Demon Beast sealed by the Tsuwabuki Family. What's the problem?"

"That's not something possible to achieve, right?", Ayano said frankly.

"The Demon Beast is the embodying of Mt. Fuji's life energy right? That's not something compatible

with a human container. Instead of taking the power isn't it true that the power would take her?"

"Well, while I certainly do believe that it's reckless, it's not something really unusual, right? People that tried to get their hands on godly powers, demon beasts et cetera you can find a dime at a dozen."

Even if it seems Ayano doesn't understand, Kazuma continues only in his mind. Just like Kureha said, for a magician it was only natural to wish for an even bigger power. The only ones who didn't think like that were those like the Kannagis and that was because they were already possessing a mighty power.

The quest for an even greater power. For a deeper knowledge. That desire has no bounds, it doesn't need reason or purpose.

To completely fall to the desire to enhance oneself, that is the honest disposition of a magician.

"But, how will she accomplish that?"

"What will you do if you know?", Kazuma repelled Ayano's question point-blank.

"Even without knowing the theory behind it, if we finish off this woman so does the story, right?"

"While that may be true…"

"I too want to know.", interposed Kureha as is backing up the hesitating Ayano.

"How much do you understand, I'm really interested in that. Besides, I've yet to listen to my secret."

"…Well, that's fine."

Finally, Kazuma agreed. Except for time buying there's no other loss.

"I think you noticed already but the power Kureha and Yuuji obtained belongs to the sealed Monster Beast."

"Yes."

Ayano nodded. As one would expect, her senses aren't so dull no to notice such a thing.

"What I mean, at this point the Demon Beasts power is already divided into three parts. The Demon Beast's <<Ki>> itself was absorbed so that means the demon's himself was divided into three parts. And then, when that is integrated again, the biggest part will take the initiative."

"But, if it's like that…", Ayano said in a doubtful voice.

She understood the theory but even so it's impossible for Kureha to win.

"Of course, at the present time its real form it's extremely big. Even Kureha and Yuuji put together probably doesn't even reach 1% of the main body. But that's where the sealing ceremony comes in."

All present turned their eyes on Ayumi. And then, on Mayumi.

"You see, the seal basically holds down and compresses not only Mt. Fuji just before the explosion but also the life force of the Demon Beast. Doubling such a powerful seal that can go on for thirty years, Kureha's power will exceed the beast's I think. So, was I right?"

"Well done!"

Kureha responded to the half-hearted question with an apathetic applause.

"You receive an A+. Gee, even though this was a plan cautiously advancing for the last five years, I wonder why there's nothing but unexpected intrusions just before it's completed?"

"Because it's only human.", said Kazuma chilly over his shoulder.

From the start, he was the kind of man that without a few exceptions is heartless towards all humanity.

He didn't happen to have any kindness for his enemy.

"Well…"

Sorting out the newly received information, Ayano looks at Ayumi and Mayumi. It seems none want to cooperate with Kureha.

"In short, that woman's plan failed right? At this point she doesn't have the power to defeat all three of us."

"Yes."

"I wonder about that."

At the same time, Kazuma and Kureha said the exact opposite words. All looks converged on the Kureha that even now still didn't lose her composure.

"Surely I don't have enough confidence to defeat all three of you and to take back the sacrifices. But, I'm pretty confident I can escape."

"What will running achieve?"

"I'll prepare a new sacrifice", Kureha declared naturally.

"You half asleep? Where will you find such a- "

Pausing his words in the middle, Kazuma turned a severe look to Mayumi.

“Oi, girl.”

“Wh- what…?”

Mayumi tried to make herself as small as possible as if she lost in the mental battle.

“What happened to the institute that made your clone?”

“…I don’t know. Perhaps, Father was controlling- “

Understanding its significance, Mayumi opened her eyes wide in terror and looked up at Kureha high in the sky.

Kureha’s lips lifted.

“I’m the one managing it now. Of course, I also store your cells.”

“Yooooooooouuuuuuuuuuu!!!”, Mayumi screamed in fury.

She couldn’t allow it. For the sake of despicable lust for Kureha to play with her cells and mass-produce imitations that looked exactly like her - the disgrace of having her very existence insulted burned through her consciousness.

“I won’t allow it! I won’t allow it! I won’t allow it! Even if it’s only you I will- “

Really angry, Mayumi released her power. From the underground stone spears grew and the blowing up pebbles coiled incessantly raining stones from the heaven.

But-

"It's useless. "

Even straining all her power, she couldn't even scratch Kureha.

Grinding her teeth in pain, Mayumi looked up at Kureha and from her eyes burning with hatred, tears fell down.

"I'll kill you…I'll definitely kill you…"

"No. You'll die here."

For the sister caught in a violent emotion, with no sign of being moved Kureha declared so, coldly.

"…"

Kazuma viewed the extreme quarrel between sisters unfolding in front of him with sober eyes. As if remembering, he searched his pocket and took out tobacco.

"Hmm?"

His lighter doesn't work. Throwing away the 100 yen lighter out of gas, he said to Ren.

"Fire."

"Ye- yes!"

Ren looked at the cigarette's pointed end. Without really doing anything, just by that the cigarette tip was ignited. Kazuma inhaled the fumes silently.

"Why are you acting like you have all the time in the world, you!?"

There, Ayano swung downward Enraiha. Easily evading it, Kazuma laughed with a carefree face.

"Calm down."

"Calm down!?", Ayano replied instantly.

"We need to hurry! To be in a rush - no matter how you look at it, that woman is already broken! If we don't deal with it now- "

"Hmm- but…"

With an attitude that had no vitality, Kazuma observed Kureha.

"To make a clone takes time right? Won't the seal get torn in the meantime?"

"That's fine.", Kureha guaranteed it.

"If I disperse mine and Yuuji's power, the mountain's <<Ki>> will stabilize. If I were to do that, even

without the ceremony the current seal will last for at least ten years."

"…Ah, is that so?"

Observing Kazuma's appearance opening his eyes wide seeming really surprised, Ayano felt a great sense of foreboding. This is not just an off prediction.

Something else, a much more absurd situation is happening.

"Kazuma…you, what did you do?"

"…"

Ayano drew near and even including an intent to kill she gripped Kazuma's collar, trying to look away.

"Don't try to deceive me with that distant expression! Spill it out! What did you do?"

"Well…it was troublesome when we were trying to get out from the underground so I just blew up the ceiling."

"Ah, something like that happened. For an instant I thought that Mt. Fuji erupted. And then?"

"Then this worlds law of action and reaction happened. When I turned my power upwards, the same amount of power was turned downwards."

"…!"

At those words Ayumi, Mayumi and Kureha held their breath. They stared at Kazuma in a pale, ashen face.

"What happened?", Ren asked Ayumi.

But instead of Ayumi that lost her voice due to terror, Mayumi answered in a cracked voice.

"…That ceremonial place is located on top of the dragon pulse emitted from Mt. Fuji. That's why we held the ceremony there, because from there we can directly reach Mt. Fuji's power."

"Wh-what! That is…"

Anticipating the conclusion, Ren changed his expression. Without concerning herself with him, Mayumi continued - as he expected.

"Just try to hit that hundred meter bedrock found there with your indecent power! The weakened seal will flip open and the demon beast will jump to his feet you know! Like, right now!"

"…"

All the people present, except for Kureha looked at Kazuma with the same intent. But, Kazuma shrugged his shoulders as if he didn't feel all the pressure gathered around him and showed a somewhat bitter smile.

"No, if you were to stop the ceremony I think the seal would be broken immediately. That's why I have a better timing. Kureha, you're the one to blame. You should have said such a thing sooner!"

All of a sudden his tone became overly familiar. But of course, just by that it's impossible to deceive them.

"You idio- "

"What have you done!?"

With enough volume to completely overtake Ayano's insult, Kureha screamed. She had the expression of an ogre.

Although her features were voluptuous, her face with eyes that became bloodshot and teeth bared became considerably frightening.

"Isn't she kind of angry?"

"…isn't it obvious?"

Intimidated by the intensity of Kureha's anger, Ayano replied in a frail manner. She felt something similar to pity for Kureha, whose ambition was thwarted by this kind of man.

"But still, her *real desire* will come true so I think she could be happy."

"Eh?", asked Ayano in return unintentionally.

High in the sky, crushing her anger, Kureha looked down on Kazuma really pissed.

"You only talk in such a round-about way - If you have something to say, say it clearly!"

"That's right! That's right!", interrupted Ayano.

Glaring at Ayano with a look of light reprimand, Kazuma continued the conversation annoyed.

"First, you said you invested five years in this plan but that's a mistake."

"What- "

"Hear me out first. For a human being the Demon Beast's power is a foreign substance. If you were to take in something like that, a sense of discomfort will appear. Actually Yuuji couldn't manifest the power he received but like an appendix in an irregular form. But you have no sense of discomfort. You are perfectly integrated."

No matter how much you investigate it, the result is the same. For a human being to grow accustomed to a demon beast's <<ki>> - no, at that time only the beast's <<ki>> can be felt.

"Just by five years - no, what's important here is the period of twenty something years you lived as a human. A human's way of being established in all those years and months can't all disappear in just five years."

"…"

Kureha said nothing. No, maybe she could't. That face, biting on her lips, looked as if she felt resentment towards her own self that couldn't object.

"Thinking about it there's just one answer. From the time you were born but not later than two or three years old you carried the demon beast's power in your body. Maybe you only looked at the Demon Beast for the last five years but long before that, for the sake of escaping the seal the beast had you under his control."

"Ho- how stupid! That's wrong! I- "

"I have even more proof."

Kazuma callously pressed even more the confused Kureha.

"Your power. If you lack the divine protection of the Spirits, what kind of power are you borrowing? Isn't it natural not to hear the Spirit's voices? Instead of senseless spirits an existence with a far stronger will and

power, endlessly shouting inside your head *Release me!* ?"

"Wro- Wrong!", Kureha raised scream full of bitterness and covered her ears.

"I decided on it by my own will! I'm not being manipulated! That's impossible!"

"If that's the case I can check right?"

Informed by Kazuma's cold words, Kureha opened her eyes wide.

"…what did you say?"

"Let's make sure. Let's ask the demon itself. All it's clear except this. Don't be reserved, I'll take care of it myself - so you can die relived!"

A wind blade vertically bisected Kureha's body, standing there in a daze.

Unable to defend, unable to resist, Kureha could't do anything. No, without even trying, she just *looked*.

A blade that invited death. The body to be killed. And - the killed body.

"…Ah?"

Split in two, Kureha was still alive. Or at the very least, she didn't die.

The body cleaved in two equal parts, with a gap of a few centimeters in between, that for some reason didn't fall but kept its balance and stood erect. Not even a drop of blood was flowing.

"Ah…aha…ahahahahahaha…"

Looking with her right eye at the left half of the body, with her left eye at the right half of the body Kureha revealed an empty laughter. There was no place for objection. Right now - no, from some long gone day she stopped being human.

Intending to manipulate everything, she was always manipulated. Only having the illusion of free will, everything stood on top of the demon beast's palm.

"This is…is this the punishment for killing Father…? Are you saying this is the appropriate punishment for my sin?", Kureha murmured smiling in a broken way.

"But there was no helping it, was there. My Father didn't love me, you know? He didn't even scold me. At that time, my father was laughing. Without even listening to the reason why I broke the taboo, he was so

happy he had the reason to get rid of the burden I was for him *he was laughing*!!"

"Onee-sama…"

"Aren't you fine? Loved by all, protected by all. Then, if no one loved me, if no one protected me, I had no choice but to become stronger. To become stronger than anyone else! Is that what you call a sin? Are you, the one that stole *everything* from me trying to blame me!?"

Kureha screaming in bitterness - without being able to look at her, Mayumi cast her eyes down.

That Kureha was Father's enemy doesn't change. But, after knowing everything Mayumi was not heartless enough to blame her.

On the other hand, when listening to Kureha violent confession, Ayano felt a different unpleasantness from Mayumi's.

This feels like a familiar story…

She stealthy peeked at Kazuma's appearance. Hiding his face, Kazuma smoked in silence. Perceiving irritation from that silhouette seemed like some sort of optical illusion.

Suddenly, Kazuma threw away his tobacco. And then.

"Shut the fuck up. Just fucking die already!"

Together with merciless words, he hit her with wind blades. This time, from her back, he cut her up horizontally.

"Wh- wait- "

Ignoring the others wincing at his excessive cruelty, he grinds the fallen tobacco.

"Nobody loved you, huh? Isn't that natural? Did you think wishes come true just by waiting for them to!? If you have something you want then work for it!"

High in the sky, there was Kureha's body divided cross-wise. As expected, holding herself together was difficult - she was shaking unsteady.

"Don't make it someone else's fault. It was all your decision. Closing yourself in because you were too afraid to deal with other people, choosing isolation once and again, wasn't it all your choice?", Kazuma shouted unable to control his words.

Does he himself realize? That Kureha is nothing else but his own twisted mirror?

Ignored by Genma, shunned by all his clan - Kannagi Kazuma and Kureha, they are terribly alike.

If he didn't became disinherited by Genma, maybe he wouldn't have found the determination to leave the home. And then - maybe he would have become something like this.

Because he could clearly imagine himself that way he felt discomfort when looking at this woman. He felt bitterness. He couldn't put up with it. He could't stand up hearing such pitiable complaints.

"If you decided to live by yourself then quietly die by yourself! After all this time don't start whining like a spoiled child!"

Countless wind blades chopped Kureha's body to shreds. As expected, unable to maintain a human shape, Tsuwabuki Kureha died.

For Kureha, annihilated without any closing words, Kazuma saw her off without offering tribute for the departed. But immediately following that, he faintly frowned.

"Shit - did it escape?"

Ayano opened her eyes wide.

"Eh? Is that thing still alive?"

"No, as expected Kureha died but I didn't get rid of that Demon Beast's <<Ki>> inside her. I wanted to decrease it even by a few percents! Well it can't be helped - "

Feeling the same thing as the Demon Beast's <<Ki>> passing through the dragon pulse and returning to Mt. Fuji - it was seized by Kazuma's sharp perception.

That doesn't only means the enemy became stronger. Although small, the <<Ki>> activated - without mistake, that was the stimulation that became the last push that made the Demon Beast open his eyes.

The time for the decisive battle was drawing closer.

"But thinking on it, she was a really pitiable person. Without being loved by anyone and trying to become stronger for this reason, just to be manipulated.", Ren murmured earnestly.

Maybe because he already saved Ayumi he now had the composure to commiserate his enemy.

Looking at that Ren with an expressionless gaze, Kazuma said.

"You, did you believe that nonsense story?"

"……yes?"

"Can I take that as an affirmation?"

After an even longer,heavier silence Ren asked blankly.

"J- just wait a second! No way, was it all just random bullshit!?"

"No, that wasn't random bullshit but I have no proof. Just pilling up one hypothesis after another, a reasoning that can't be verified by proof is the same as trash. If you gulp it down so easily you'll be seen as an idiot."

"Then, why did you say all those things?"

To Ren's timid questioning Kazuma answered exasperated holding his head.

"That woman was strong enough for it to become a hard fight if I were to fight her directly. Not to become tired before the main performance, I tried my best to bluff but I didn't believe it would be that effective. Your Onii-chan was so surprised!"

"…"

He brought the conversation to a finish very sweetly but that didn't soften the shock even a little bit.

Not a cruel voice can be heard. Even Mayumi who hated Kureha the most couldn't suppress her pity.

"…how cowardly…", murmured Ayano.

They were just two words but others that would express Kazuma's behavior more accurately don't exist in this world.

All the party, except Kazuma, nodded showing their deep agreement.

"*All for the winner* - isn't that a fine expression?"

Of course, Kazuma didn't pay attention to their reaction.

Part 4

"Well then isn't it about time?"

At Kazuma's words, standing alone, everyone's body shivered.

Even without having to say it they all noticed. That the earth was vibrating slightly but continuously.

The activity of the ground spirits already reached a state of wild excitement.

A great existence was in the process of waking up. The earth was being scared of that omen.

"It- it's coming!"

Suddenly Ayumi shouted. Immediately-

The sky was dyed red.

"!!"

The light source that removed the darkness was a pillar of flame gushing out from Mt. Fuji's crater. The red hot magma running up as if aiming at the heavens was glittering in a vivid red.

"…This means the eruption comes first, huh? This is quite a surprise."

"Why are you so calm about the situation?"

Expressionless, Ren drew closer to Kazuma taking his time to admire at leisure the magnificence of the scenery.

"There wasn't supposed to be any damage."

"Well, calm down. It's no use arguing about spilled milk. Besides, just one eruption shot won't do too much damage. If it's that degree it will basically cool down by the time it reaches the foot of the mountain - Ooh?"

Kazuma, trying to comfort Ren and soothe him, forgot his words at the scene in front of his eyes. When Ren turned his head in confusion he had the same reaction.

The lava, unable to reach the heavens fell down and returned to the crater describing a clearly unnatural arc.

As if the mountain didn't want to let loose even a drop of its own heat. Taking back all it spit out with the same opening Mt. Fuji became apparently dull.

But -

"It's - not over."

Without a need for warning they all understood. That this is the beginning.

It's coming out. Something, extremely unbelievable.

"So, what will come out?"

With an expression used when tearing open a present's wrapping paper but with a facial expression that goes beyond dangerous, Kazuma said so.

The seal already lost its effect. Following the caldera, from the depths of earth an enormous power was crawling out. The footsteps that made the earth tremor, they had the feeling they could hear them.

"Eh?"

Before noticing it, that *thing* showed on the summit of the mountain. Omitting all the process.

"Just now, how did it appear?"

"As if I know. Maybe it teleported."

Kazuma casually answered Ayano's question. It seems that even by using his power of perception this man couldn't capture its movement process. The question on how it really crossed over the space was recurrent.

"Please stop it…making that stupid appearance…"

" - It doesn't particularly feel slow-witted."

"But isn't that a turtle!?"

"Well…it's a turtle."

It seems they both agree on this. Certainly, of all the living things it resembles a turtle the most.

Two short feet, protruding from a shell, a head and a tail. But that thing lacked all that made a turtle lovely.

Almost like it was made of rock, the acute-angled body was composed of only planes and straight lines. From its mouth many atrocious fangs stood up in line. And then, among that boorish body that seemed made of inorganic substance, almost like a different creature only the tail, like a living thing, took the shape on a large snake.

And then, more dreadful than anything else, that appearance was *understanding*.

The Demon Beast was at the top of the mountain, they were at the base of it. The distance between them was approximately ten kilometers. But - even so *it was looking*.

The fangs that were fully visible, sheet after sheet of snake scales, they could perceive it all as if it were in front of their eyes.

It wasn't just big. The excessively overwhelming power, its own being was etched in detail in their consciousness not permitting a vague recognition.

"Is this…Genbu (trad: The Black Tortoise)? But, that was supposed to be the Sacred Beast of water…"

"Well, it's impossible to be that thing right? Folklore about a mountain sustaining turtle exists in China but this has no association with it.", answered Kazuma without positive proof.

And then, Ayumi explained.

"That thing shape was decided by us."

"By the Tsuwabuki Family?"

"No, by humans."

Contemplating on it for a while, Kazuma reached an answer.

"Its shape was given by the power of the collective unconscious?"

"It's not something that grand. If we were to consult the records from those days, at first it had an indefinite shape but took one while fighting and finally became that. It's called Zenon."

" - Who the heck named it like that three hundred years ago?"

Achilles and the tortoise?[4]

Unintentionally Kazuma laughed at an inappropriate time.

The practitioners that fought *Zenon* and the people that saw it happen imagined it various ways.

What is this thing or something. They saw the sturdy turtle they couldn't suppress no matter how much they attacked and maybe they remembered the same Chinese legend like Kazuma did.

Or maybe, unable to catch up with it no matter how long they chased, they found out the transcendent nature resembling a philosophical contradiction.

That kind of deed gave the course of action - the shape for that confusing power.

The fact that they fought with the intent to throw it down but on the contrary they couldn't kill the enemy can only be called ironic.

"That's why, the Tsuwabuki concealed Zenon's existence even after the sealing. For the sake of not giving it an even clearer form. If at a different time the seal is solved, they prayed it would revert to the original disorderly power."

"It seems that's a wasted effort."

"That's true. Maybe it already stabilized like this."

The two exchanged a dry smile.

Ren viewed the situation somewhat displeased but he couldn't really complain.

"Hey - ", Ayano pulled the hem of Kazuma's jacket.

"Isn't it kind of looking at us?"

"Aah. As if it were a loaded gun.", Kazuma nodded.

The Demon Beast - Zenon, was starring here with a look full of hatred. That pressure could be felt on the skin.

Thinking what happened since the beginning, the manifestation of Zenon's crude <<Ki>> - he's a cluster of destructive impulses. It's impossible to turn its hatred on a particular somebody.

"And yet, why?"

"It's just a conjecture but will you listen?"

"Say it."

"It's Kureha.", Kazuma frankly answered.

"The plan failed but a part of the demon beast was mingled with her. Although impossible to capture, the emotion that occupied most of her consciousness - like her hate towards us is influencing it, maybe."

"Don't use *us*. The only one Kureha hated was you. You're the one who fucked her up, made her despair and finally massacred her!"

"The same thing.", Kazuma eluded the riposte calmly, shrugging his shoulders.

"It seems we can omit the time needed to climb up to the top! It's coming!"

Simultaneously with his words, Zenon vanished. And one instant later, he reappeared.

Right in front of Ayano.

" - !!"

The head that opened its mouth in a big way, descended from right overhead. Time to react, there was none.

" - RAAAAAAAAH!!"

But Kazuma, jumping out in front of Ayano with a powerful gale, knocked the rock head with a fist clad in wind.

The demon beast's cranium was instantly pulverized and that huge build flew in midair.

"What the heck was that? Can it seriously teleport!?"

"No, that's wrong. That was reconstruction."

"What's that?"

"It temporarily reduced its body to <<Ki>> went through the dragon pulse and then reconstructed. It really helps that there is a time lag before reorganizing its body."

Saying that, Kazuma focused on Zenon. The head that was supposed to be pulverized was regenerated for the most part.

"Wow it's really not working - Ayumi!"

"Y- yes!"

"Run away. As far as your body can hold."

She drew out her chin. Maybe she became self-conscious of her own uselessness. Ayumi nodded deeply and started running without saying anything.

Around the time that silhouette disappeared Zenon finished regenerating and got up. Looking at him from the front he is really huge. Including his tail, his length measures more than a hundred meters. A majestic appearance certainly appropriate for the mountain's avatar.

"Hmm!"

Even so, without hesitating, Kazuma showed a fearless smile and looked up at that large build.

"Come, let's go! Hey vanguard, just knock him off already like we previously discussed. Isn't that your only redeeming feature?"

"Shut up baka!"

With a retort that was already close to a conditional reflex, Ayano began to run straight ahead.

Zenon overlooked the petty living thing that didn't know its place from a higher position looking bored.

"KYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHH!!"

"Don't shout stupid turtle!!"

While backing up the advancing Ayano, the rear guard made up of two people starting attacking. Wind and flame - that power that would obliterate a dozen demon beasts in one go, how effective will it be against this opponent -

Setting up Enraiha while running wind and flame passed her from both sides.

Using long distance attacks as a faint and using Enraiha for the finishing blow - that was their most basic tactic.

"GYAAAAAAAAAAHH!!"

Once again the Demon Beast howled. As if invited by that scream, rock snakes appeared from the underground - an infinite number of them.

Each was a serpent with two meters in diameter and they all blocked the way to Zenon. And then, using their bodies to stop the wind and flame, they gulped it down and were crushed.

I can still go!!

Ayano didn't stop from running. Forcibly breaking through the diminished snake barrier, she was aiming at Zenon's body.

A turbulent presence was generated high in the sky. The presence she grew accustomed to when fighting Kureha. She instantly understood.

A gravitation field.

And in addition to that, a different order of magnitude than Kureha's. An extravagant gravitation field was formed that right now was changing to something like a black hole. It's not like she can't oppose it but -

"Kazuma!", she shouted without turning her face around.

Believing she could be understood only by that, Ayano ignored the gravitational field and went even further.

Zenon's foot that was soaring right in front of her, she cut it in one stroke. Simultaneously a wind blade split open the gravitational field.

That was an extremely exquisite combination - if it was successful, but -

"…wa!?"

Reverberating with a hard sound Enraiha bounced back without being able to scratch the surface. The wind blade that tried to cut the gravitational field was crushed and vanished instead.

"Che!"

"Nee-sama!"

Ren hit with all his power the gravitational field that tried to crush Ayano. And a new wind blade swung downward and this time managed to slice and tear up the warped space.

"Fall back!"

Obeying Kazuma's direction, Ayano speedily retreated. There was no pursuit.

"Wait a second, that's absurdly hard! How did you manage to smash its head?"

"No, it would turn bad if I would attempt it a second time."

Sidestepping Ayano that drew closer agitated, Kazuma casually shook his head.

"Eh? That means - "

"Yes, it hardened since then."

Ayano looked up at Kazuma with a pale complexion.

"Does that mean it's evolving?"

"Instead of evolving maybe adapting oneself would be more appropriate - well, it's the same no matter what we call it…this is bad."

Receiving damage and then enhancing itself so that it can withstand that degree of damage. Furthermore its energy reaches almost infinite levels so it can more or less immediately recover from that damage.

"How- how are we supposed to fight that kind of opponent?"

At Ayano's question Kazuma showed his open hands as if saying *give up hope*.

"What to do?"

"*What to do?* you say - "

Before the unintentionally speechless found a retort, the situation changed.

A group of remaining rock snakes opened their mouths simultaneously. From inside, darkness was peeking out.

" - Run!"

Coincident with the shout, Kazuma grabbed Ren and jumped with all his strength. Ayano too, left that place with all her energy.

Immediately following that, something invisible ran through the place the trio stood. That something drilled the thick sea of trees opening a straight road in it.

The Tsuwabuki mansion placed up ahead in a straight line was annihilated without trace. Without using an explosion or blaze - literally annihilated.

Descending on the ground surface with a new outlook on life, Kazuma murmured.

"Is this…what you call a gravity rifle…? This is turning more and more into a SF…"

"Now it's not the time for side comments! Just hurry up and get serious already!!"

Kazuma made a contract with the Spirit Lord and is holding a power that exceeds the human container.

Ayano is telling him to let it out but -

"I don't really care but if I were to do that but after five minutes I'm out. Do you take responsibility for what happens after?"

It's not like Kazuma is suppressing his power on a whim or to show off. Using a power that rises above humanity in a human body, first of all that sort of thing is impossible.

If he were to overcome that impossibility a back lash will always appear.

He didn't test the limit but it's around five minutes. Anything more than that will fry his brain. Since they have yet to find a breach it would be reckless to use their only trump card.

"Ugh - you're useless!"

"Say that after you did something!"

Ren looked at these two, exchanging a bloodthirsty conversation, with anxiety. Becoming aware of that gaze, Kazuma softened his facial expression.

"It's fine. I fought a much stronger opponent than myself on countless occasions."

Even I said that -

Silently, Kazuma continued.

It's the first time I oppose such overwhelming odds. Can we do this?

But before Kazuma had time to think of a counter plan, the situation deteriorated even more.

Raising a howl Zenon summoned a large quantity of new rock snakes from underground.

The rock snakes whose numbers suddenly doubled simultaneously oppened their mouths.

"Wait a seeeeecond!!"

On the battlefield where the gravity guns were flying wildly about the trio could do nothing but run.

And then -

Disobeying Kazuma's command Ayumi was watching over the battlefield from a short distance.

Even for her untrained eyes it was clear that Ren's group was cornered.

Wha- what to do…

"How unsightly."

"!?"

From the trembling Ayumi's back a voice full of scorn was suddenly raised. When turning around, in Ayumi's eyes war reflected the same face.

"Ma- Mayumi-sama - "

Without answering, Mayumi eyes were full of glee watching Kazuma and the rest being driven to the wall.

"After all that talking it eventually became such a sad sight, huh? It's impossible for humans to destroy that thing. Are they stupid?"

Openly expressing her scorn she overlooked her imitation, whose eyes were like those of a frightened puppy.

"Well then, let's go."

"Eh? Wh- where?"

"Withdrawing for the moment, reorganizing our force and then resuming the ceremony. Because both these guys and Kureha were acting stupid the command line was torn…so for now, we're leaving this place."

Mayumi took Ayumi's hand and tried to pull her but Ayumi resisted firmly planting her feet on the ground.

"Such a thing! Please wait! We can't abandon Ren - "

"I don't care about those guys! There're fighting Zenon by their own will so they can die for all I care!"

by their own will

Mayumi's words had the opposite effect - that exact phrase made Ayumi decide. Including force, she shook off Mayumi's hand.

"It's not yet decided that they are going to lose!"

"They can't possibly win!"

"They'll win! I - I will- "

Mayumi opened her eyes wide in shock watching the pathetic determination hardening on that face. What was Ayumi trying to do - she understood it.

"Y- you - "

"Mayumi-sama."

With a pale face but watching Mayumi steady the girl implored in a trembling voice.

"Lend me your strength! Not enough to perfectly seal it but if we could weaken it, Ren will definitely defeat Zenon."

"Don't- Don't mess around! Why would I have to - "

“Think about it calmly!”

Ayumi drew near, completely overturning the power relationship.

“If you were to go now and gather the remaining Chijutsushi do you think that this newly set free Zenon will let you do it? If you want to do it, now is the time! If there’s the two of us surely - “

“No! I don’t want to die!”

As if trying to deny Ayumi’s words, Mayumi covered her ears. In those eyes, looking down on her own replica pure terror was floating.

“You don’t have to do it until that point! Only to reduce Zenon’s power - “

“No! Definitely no!”, screamed Mayumi blocking her ears. Closing her eyes firmly as if to shut away reality, she shook her head and crouched down like a helpless child.



Overlooking Mayumi refusing to listen to anything, Ayumi let out a sigh.

"I understand. Well then."

She lowered her head, accepting what she shouldn't have seen and started walking towards the battlefield.

Understanding that Ayumi intends on sealing Zenon by herself, Mayumi unintentionally asked.

"You…Do you feel like killing yourself?"

Ayumi quietly looked over her shoulder. Overawed by her determined gaze, Mayumi slightly looked away.

"Wrong.", Ayumi declared with no hesitation.

"I want to live. I want to live together with Ren!"

Bowing her head once again in front of the speechless Mayumi, Ayumi started running.

"…I'm beaten…there's no end to this…"

With a voice blurred with weariness, Kazuma coughed. Ayano and Ren were panting, lightly injured on different parts of their bodies.

They were not done yet. Chopping down rock snakes, they even managed to injure Zenon. But that was immediately healed.

It was as if swinging their fists at the ground. Because the opponent was too large, there wasn't a meaning in attacking it. Even with a meaning there was no result from attacking it.

They didn't even had a match. The current status doesn't allow for a competition. One-sidedly scraping off their physical strength, it's only waiting for a chance to annihilate them - they were in the midst of such a hopeless situation. When Ayumi started participating in the war.

"Ayumi-chan?"

Suddenly recognizing Ayumi's appearance rushing in at the last minute, Ren changed his expression.

"Don't- don't to that! Run away quickly - "

Without answering, positioning herself at the same distance from Ren and Zenon, at the top of an equilateral triangle, she adjusted her breathing.

And then, slowly kneeling she joined hands taking a posture of prayer.

"Ayumi-chan…?"

After a few seconds, from Ayumi's body an enormous power was released. On earth light ripples ware running, and little by little they converged to where Zenon was.

What was she doing, Ren immediately understood.

"Ayumi-chan! No!"

Ren began to run trying to stop her. But from his back Kazuma asked a question on a low tone.

"Where are you going, brat?"

"What are you asking, Ayumi-chan is - "

Not concerned about Ren's agitation, indifferently, Kazuma asked again.

"What did you say to Ayumi?"

"Eh? That…that is…"

What do you want to do?

" - But!"

"Ayumi answered your question. What will you do?"

"…"

Biting his lip, Ren turned his back to Ayumi. He looked up at Zenon. Surely, its power was weakened.

If it's like that - they can win.

"I'll butcher it. Nii-sama get serious!"

"Ok."

Nodding deeply, Kazuma closed his eyes. Several seconds after - the pair of eyes that showed a second time were dyed in a transparent blue. That was the carved seal engraved by the spirit Lord of the Wind. The wind spirits playing in the sky were the evidence that he was allowed to control everything.

Holding a power that tremendously magnified in his hands, the supreme ruler of the sky fearlessly laughed.

"So, let's go - the spirit of reincarnation from just one mountain, smash it to pieces until there's nothing left!"

Part 5

Ayumi felt the fast approaching <<Death>> closing in with each second. As if she were a drained water tank, the power was flowing out of her at an alarming rate.

Even though she understood that she will die the moment this power will have run out, she didn't try to *save* it.

It wasn't out of despair. She didn't plan on risking her life. For the sake of living with Ren, it was necessarily to do so, so she did it.

Just a bit more, just a bit more.

But that wasn't an infinite power. Enduring it with great effort, compensating for it with fighting spirit, she did it to the limit. Her breathing was severed, she couldn't help but to inhale.

Just… a bit…more…

As if she was turned off, she suddenly lost all her senses. The consciousness that sunk into the darkness, no matter how much she called out to it, her body already doesn't have enough force to respond to it. She slowly collapsed forward -

"What are you doing?"

On the verge of collapsing front-faced on the ground a stretched out hand from the back sized the nape of her neck and pulled back Ayumi's body. Her awaken consciousness recognized the silhouette of her savior.

"Mayumi…sama…?"

"You talk big but is this it? If you, the one that should be protected dies first what will happen?"

Folding her arms arrogantly, Mayumi sneered at the foolish doll.

"Though you're my imperfect clone I don't want you to lose from such a thing."

"…"

In blank amazement Ayumi looked up at Mayumi. In other words, this is -

" - Hmm."

Making an entirely arrogant facial expression Mayumi raised Ayumi's chin.

"I don't want to be told that by Mayumi-sama who deserted under the enemy's fire."

Making such a provocative declaration with all her strength, a huge vein popped on Mayumi's temple.

"…you can talk back now, huh?"

"Of course. That's because I'm nothing but Mayumi-sama's duplicate. Besides, no matter who it is, the performance of the one that is born after is obviously excellent."

"…very good…"

While her temples were violently convulsing, Mayumi murmured in a low voice.

"Should I teach you what the original's power is like? Prostrate yourself in front of the overwhelming power difference Ayumi!"

Together with a sonorous shout, Mayumi released her power. The ripple that paused when Ayumi used all her strength started binding the demon beast for a second time.

Mayumi-sama, thank you very much.

Expressing words of gratitude inside her heart, she bowed deeply at Mayumi's back. And once again she adjusted her breathing and gave her own power to Mayumi. The doubled effort tied Zenon much more powerfully.

With this we can win - No, we <<will>> win. And then, together -

While mustering all her strength, Ayumi addressed Ren.

- we will become happy, right?

"Wooooooooohhh!!"

The wind blade released by Kazuma cut all four of Zenon's legs. Not letting the moment it was disconected from the earth escape, he pushed up the limbless body into the sky.

As long as Zenon comes in contact with the ground it has an infinite amount of power. So, in order to defeat it, all its links with the earth must be severed, attack it with the greatest amount of power while in that state, and before it can regenerate destroy it so that not even a fragment of its existence is left behind.

That chance, doesn't appear very often. There was only this moment.

"We finish it off right now!", Kazuma shouted, while forcibly throwing away Ren body, found nearby.

Surprised for just one moment he quickly understood Kazuma's plan and he converged all his power at one point.

"Match it from below!"

"Ok!"

In accordance with Kazuma's instruction, Ayano slipped right under Zenon. While in the Hassō-no-kamae stance, she put all her remaining power on the single stroke and swung it with all her strength.

The plasma whose caloric value rivaled that of the sun sank inside Zenon's shell. And then, from overhead, the descending Ren released all his power.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH!!!"

The calorific value Ren emitted at that time may have exceeded Ayano's holding Enraiha. The gushing out golden plasma simply went through the impenetrable shell, broke it and burned it to nothing.

Broken pieces of Zenon were scattering and exploding in all directions - but Kazuma didn't permit the existence of such delicate splinters.

"Vanish!!"

A hard wind exceeding the speed of sound - no, the intent to kill carried by the wind annihilated the countless fragments until none remained.

Literally annihilated. Without even leaving dust, all traces of Zenon's existence disappeared.

"Aahh - shit!", spit out Kazuma, tired.

That was the limit. His brain was about to start burning off. With the last of his power making Ren, about to crash, land softly, right away the seal placed on his eyes was resumed. He couldn't move, not even a step. If he were to release his consciousness he would continue sleeping for at least three days.

But…I can't do that.

He had the obligation to see the end with his own eyes. Because although he knew he did everything he could he didn't stop it.

We can't save can we? Me and you too…

We…we wooooooooooooonn!!

While flying down on the wind, Ren was overjoyed inside.

He quickly wanted to meet Ayumi. He wanted to see Ayumi's delighted face. That thought was overflowing his consciousness.

A few more meters remained before reaching the ground but he hurriedly destroyed the wind barrier and jumped out.

Coincident with his landing, he started running. Aiming for the girl he loved more than anyone else.

"Ayumi-chan!"

To Ren waving his hand with a fully smiling face Ayumi returned a blank smile,and then - she collapsed.

"Ayumi-chan?"

Ren stood still opening his eyes wide in surprise but when he calmed down he immediately ran to her.

He held the senseless girl in his arms and shouted.

"Ayumi-chan! Ayumi-chan…!?"

"What happened…!?"

Ayano too tried to run over when she realized the disaster that befallen Ayumi. But, Kazuma's hand restrained her.

Gripping her hand firmly, Kazuma said:

"You're not needed."

"What are you saying? She needs treatment quickly - "

"I said it's not needed", Kazuma repeated, not looking her in the eyes.

Just hearing that serious tone, Ayano's face, elated from victory became stiff.

"What the heck…is that?"

Standing in front of Kazuma, Ayano asked with a cracked voice.

"What are you trying to say? Answer me! Look into my eyes!"

"…"

With a sigh turned to the sky, he pointed an emotionless glance to Ayano. And then - he suddenly started a story that apparently didn't have any connection to this one.

"…Ayumi, Mayumi's clone, said she grew up this much in just one month, right?"

"Yeah, that's what I heard."

"You can't do such a thing."

"…eh?"

At Ayano's involuntary question, Kazuma repeated plainly.

"With the contemporary science human clones can be made but you can't accelerate their growth. If you want to create a twelve years old clone you need twelve years."

"Just- just wait a second."

Not really understanding, Ayano hastily interrupted Kazuma's words.

"But, isn't Ayumi actually here? Are you trying to say Ayumi is not really a clone?"

"…wouldn't that be nice?"

At the convenient guess, Kazuma was really cynical. He showed a wasted smile.

"Mayumi's father managed to accomplish something that the science can't. What I mean - "

"Jya jya jya jyan!"

Interrupting Kazuma's explanation, with a skyrocketing high tension, without understanding the situation, blurting out her thoughts.

"They used something that for us fairies is more important that anything else, the egg from which the next Patriarch will be born!"

At those two's blank stare, Tiana stuck out her chest with an <<ahem>>.

"…egg?"

Noticing Kazuma's isolated murmur, Tiana pressed her mouth noticing the verbal slip. But, she immediately started talking non-stop.

"Actually - that is right. Ah, that doesn't necessarily mean we reproduce by eggs you know! Is this what you call a <<metaphorical expression>>?"

"You, where have you been until now?", Ayano interrupted the stream of words with a indistinct expression and cross-examined the fairy that appeared out of nowhere.

"Eh? It was scary so I took refuge. But it seems everything's over so I thought to come back to carry out the request. Hey, hey, can you hurry up? So you must wait until that kid dies? At any rate that's two or three minutes more - Ugyaaa?"

Without saying anything, mercilessly, Kazuma grabbed Tiana tightly.

"You…You can't talk until I say so."

There was no need to continue with *or else…* Coerced by the overflowing, naked thirst for blood, Tiana voicelessly fainted.

"Well, that's how it is. That way Ayumi was forcibly grown to the age where she can endure the ceremony."

Throwing away the fainted fairy, Kazuma continued as if he didn't do anything.

"Using such a excessive method will naturally burden the body. That's why her life span was so short. Yesterday, her cells already began to crumble. And she squeezed out that much power with her body in such a state. There's nothing to be done."

"No way…"

Ayano murmured in a daze and - unexpectedly scowled at Kazuma with angry eyes.

"Why…if you knew such a thing, why didn't you stop Ayumi?"

"And then what would have happened?", Kazuma asked back coldly.

"Stop her and then we all die together - would that have been better?"

"That's…"

Becoming speechless, Ayano hanged her head heartbroken.

"Then, what did we fight for? Wanting to save her, didn't we just shorten that girl's life span!?"

"…"

Kazuma looked up at the sky for a second time. And then, while on that posture, standing alone, he muttered.

" - I'm sorry for being so weak."

"!!"

That's wrong…

She understood. This was not Kazuma's fault. It's not only Kazuma's fault. She doesn't deserve to condemn others.

Not meeting his eyes, hanging her hand in shame, Ayano apologized.

"Sorry…I took it out on you…"

"That's right."

Although blunt Kazuma embraced Ayano tenderly. While brushing her head gently the way as if comforting a child, he said close to her ears.

"You can do at least that much. Because this time I really couldn't do anything."

"I was even more…"

"Aaah. Let's get stronger. So that we can protect next time."

"Fuuu…"

Pressing her head on Kazuma's chest, Ayano cried.

While feeling unbearably comfortable. The warmth of the wide chest, the feeling of Kazuma gently brushing her head.

"Ayumi-chan! Ayumi-chan! Pull yourself together!"

Holding Ayumi's completely limp body, Ren called out to her with a frantic expression.

Maybe because that feeling was transmitted, Ayumi's closed eyelids slowly opened.

"…Ren?"

"Ayumi…chan…"

"I'm so glad - I meet you again…"

Softly and tenderly, Ayumi smiled. Just by watching that clear facial expression, Ren realized.

That she was beyond his help. Unable to bear it, tears were flooding.

"…Ayumi-chan…"

"…I used too much power…I'm already…no good…"

I couldn't protect - At that regretful thought scorching Ren's body Ayumi showed an absurd smile, as if she lost something petty.

"I'm sorry…I…I wanted more…"

Ayumi slowly shook her head. As if saying *it's not Ren's fault*.

"Listen, Ren…in the end, I have only one wish…"

"In the end…!"

Beginning to speak, Ren opened and closed his mouth soundlessly. At this point, words of consolation have no meaning.

"…what is is?"

No matter what wish, I'll grant it, Ren decided strongly in his heart. It doesn't matter if it takes him all his life.

If she will say she wants both to leave together, he will gladly die.

Ren brought hie ear closer to listen to Ayumi's faint murmur.

"Don't…pity me…"

"!!"

Unintentionally Ren opened his eyes and watched Ayumi.

Without regret or attachment, there it was the pupil that calmly accepted death.

Different from the same way she was when he first met her, she doesn't think it's fine to die because she has no reason to live. Having finished what she had to

do, dying with that satisfaction, her eyes were full of that pride.

"I…don't regret it…you see, I decided it by myself. Just like Ren said, by my own will, I chose what to do. That's why…that's why…understand. I'm not a *pitiable child*. I can stick out my chest against anyone, I lived, that kind of life…"

"Yes…yes."

While endlessly shedding tears, Ren nodded many times over.

"That's true…Ayumi-chan was, splendid…so much stronger, than I am…"

"Really…? If you really think so, I'm happy…"

Ayumi laughed gently. Feeling as if that silhouette was growing hazy, Ren blinked.

"!!"

It wasn't an optical illusion.

She collapsed like trash. Her hair, her hands, her feet. From the extremities of her body, like sand, Ayumi's body mercilessly started crumbling and the life made of trash turned to trash, incapable of leaving a corpse.

"A…yumi…chan…"

His face crumbled by the overflowing tears, Ren called out the girl's name. Ayumi's face pouted, looking up at Ren.

"No, Ren. Smile - "

"Ayumi-chan…"

"The last time I see Ren's face I don't want it to be a crying face. I want you to see me off smiling. That's why, please?"

"Ayumi-chan - "

The face distorted by grief, Ren forcibly turned it into a smiling one. One that no matter how you look at it strangely smiles while crying but Ayumi, looking happy, returned a content smile.

That perfectly clear smiling face was showing that the end is near. A human being cannot smile in such a pure way.

That was an angel or maybe the smile of martyrdom from a holy woman.

Not yet!

He could not yet believe that it was over. Ren has yet to say the most important thing. He came all this way for the sake of telling her that important thing.

"Ayumi-chan!"

There have been only two days since they met. But even so, inside Ren's heart the girl's existence became more important than anyone else's.

He couldn't protect her.

He couldn't save her.

They couldn't be together.

More important than anyone and anything, Ren's only one. Even if she changed to rubbish, that thought doesn't change.

"I love Ayumi-chan!"

It was obvious even without the words but he never said it before.

He just wanted to say this. He had to say this. Not out of compassion, not out of a sense of obligation, he had to convey the feeling that got him this far.

"I love Ayumi-chan more than anyone else in the world!"

Opening her eyes, her pupils were clouded with tears. Her face was tinged with red, and the transcendent, heavenly smile returned to one appropriate to a girl her age.

"…, …"

Looking up at Ren, Ayumi quietly murmured. But that whisper already couldn't make the atmosphere vibrate and disappeared inside her mouth.

"Eh? What - ", Ren asked back, but at that moment -

Zaaaaahh

with a dry sound, Ayumi's full body changed to trash.

From the gaps between his arms, the substance that was Ayumi spilled and dissipated.

The shrine maiden costume that lost its master was strongly, strongly embraced by the boy.

"…"

The only proof that the girl existed was the lingering warmth that has yet to disappear from the clothes.

Swept away by the wind, Ayumi disappeared from this world.

"What are you doing? Do you have a miko fetish at such a young age?"

Ren, frantically clinging to the white robe, teeth bared, heard such a sober voice.

Ren raised his face as if flipping.

"…nii-sama…"

" - Aaah"

"…couldn't protect…I couldn't protect…"

"It's not like that."

" - eh?"

To Ren's blank face, Kazuma trivially replied.

"She had a short life but she died well. She died while smiling. She'll have no regrets."

"But…"

"No buts. Do you want to look down on her last request? Don't pity her. That's insulting."

"But…but…"

Grasping his hands tightly, shedding tears for his own powerlessness, Ren forced the words out.

"I couldn't be together with her…I couldn't make her happy…"

"…I think she was happy enough as it was…"

Overlooking Ren with a troubled face, Kazuma murmured.

"If not for you, Ayumi would have died in ignorance, without understanding the meaning of happiness or that of despair. You rescued her from that. Isn't that enough?"

Without saying anything he shook his completely crumpled, tear-stained face. Many, many times over.

Kazuma gave up on persuading him and let out a small breath.

" - Well a man who would take the death of the woman he fell in love in a very rational way would be very eerie. If you want to cry then cry. You don't have hold back."

He beckoned him as if saying *come!* and Ren jumped into his brother's chest with force enough for a body blow. And then, he started crying in a large voice.

"UWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!"

Hardly grasping his fists, he hit Kazuma's chest many times over. Without even moving his body an inch, taking it all in, Kazuma gently brushed Ren's head.

"Ayumi-chan! Ayumi-chan! Ayumi-chaaaann!"

The boy's sobs resounded over and over again at night in the sea of trees.

Epilogue

Holding under his arm the tube containing his graduation certificate, Ren looked up at the school building he spent six years in.

It's spring and that means he became a junior high school student. Although one might say the new school is close to the old one, it doesn't really feel like a new beginning.

In the school yard the sakura trees are early blooming, pleasing the eyes of the ceremony attendants. Ren too, looked at the sakura trees and harbored his already habitual thoughts.

I wanted to show this to Ayumi-chan.

Two months already passed since that incident. His scars mended for the most part and those that didn't were replaced with something else - Today also, the world goes on like nothing happened.

The Tsuwabuki family was restored. Although their residence was completely destroyed, they had few casualties, and the only people that died were Iwao and Kureha so it was the natural conclusion.

By the way, it seemed Yuuji completely recovered. He became the adviser of Mayumi - the new Head and he was working diligently.

But for Ren that didn't matter.

According to their report Mt. Fuji didn't completely *Die*. Because of Zenon's annihilation his spirit became almost exhausted. By taking in the surrounding <<Ki>>, it seemed he was slowly recovering. It seems that it will need approximately five hundred years to store enough power to erupt.

But for Ren that didn't matter.

And for the fairy egg that was inside Mayumi, it seems Tiana recovered it without problems while Ren was crying. Later it seems Kazuma received his remuneration without fail.

But for Ren that didn't matter.

"Ayumi-chan…"

Even now, Ren can't accept Ayumi's death. Day after day - no, through out the day, he's only thinking such thoughts.

If he could have done it better, Ayumi wouldn't have died at that place. And, even for a month, they would have passed their days in happiness.

No, maybe they would have managed to heal her body and she would smile next to him even now.

Only those kind of thoughts popped out in his head.

I wanted to see something pretty.

The girl's too modest wish didn't go away, burning inside Ren.

"More…I wanted to show you so many things. The world is so beautiful and yet…"

And yet she's not here. Nowhere in this world.

"I can't be happy by myself…"

Whenever he saw a beautiful scene, he thought so. And he wished - if she were next to him -

"I want to meet you - "

He can't forget. No, it's not like he had the intention to forget. Together with the sense of helplessness from not being able to protect, the thought will burden him for his entire life.

But, it didn't stop. Accepting Ayumi's death as reality, before settling this inside himself he can't move forward.

At the very least that word, her whisper on the verge of death, if he could only hear it -

What did you say to me?

When he told her his feelings, Ayumi said something back. The was the biggest regret.

If he were to say it out loud, Kazuma would make fun of him. Ayano would hit him. They would complain unanimously.

"Isn't it obvious, such a thing!?"

Rationally, Ren also understood. It doesn't seem likely she would reply just to turn him down.

But he didn't hear the words. Ayumi replied to his confession. If he could hear it once he could put behind his first love. Without prolonging those feelings, he will be able to look for tomorrow.

Looking up at the sky as if she was there somewhere, Ren whispered.

"I love you."

How many times did he say those words to the sky since that day? Obviously, there was no response. But still Ren prayed to hear her reply that day.

"I love Ren too."

"…?"

Seeming to hear something that was impossible, Ren looked up at the sky.

Naturally, there's nothing there. No - for a second, something close showed on his field of vision.

"Hallucination?"

He had the feeling he saw the girl's figure with wings…

"…auditory hallucination?"

Thinking hard about it his mind was maybe driven to a pretty bad place.

But, he doesn't care, even if it's an illusion. Hearing Ayumi's voice after two months, he felt his depressed consciousness lifting.

This sort of auditory hallucination I want to hear more…

He left the school gate with light steps. Outside, Kazuma and Ayano were waiting.

"Nii-sama! Nee-sama!"

Raising his hand and calling their name, both of them slightly opened their eyes wide in surprise.

"I'm sorry for making you wait."

"…"

"What?"

Asking while slightly tilling his head, Ayano waived her hand in confusion.

"Ah, it's nothing…Congratulation on your graduation. - By the way, did something good happen?"

"No, not really."

"…I see."

With an obvious look of incomplete understanding, Ayano stopped any further investigation.



Ren asked Kazuma.

"Am I weird?"

"Instead of weird, it's more like your expression drastically improved."

"…hmmm."

After thinking on it for a while, Ren suddenly changed the topic.

"By the way, I heard about the fairy egg that was inside Ayumi but are fairies produced from eggs?"

"As if I knew the reproduction method for such random creatures. I wouldn't be surprised if they grew from tree crotches"

Immediately replying point-blank, Kazuma started a more serious explanation.

"Well Tiana said the egg was a metaphor. The lump of life force, un-specialized, whose course of action has yet to be determined - that was the metaphor. I don't know their concrete method of reproduction. Ah, come to think of it…", Kazuma said, as if taking the opportunity.

"A legend from somewhere around Britain said that children that died before they were baptized turn to pixies."

"Hmm, that's interesting.", Ren replied as naturally as possible.

children that died before they were baptized - that was an expression resulted from the Christianity practiced in Britain but it would have been more natural to say *souls of children that after death don't have a caretaker*.

Uninfluenced by God or Buddha so they were children that didn't go to either Heaven or Hell. That means that the soul with no place to go becomes a pixie.

Japanese people forget about their religion except for the memorial service - but all of them are attached to a religion. Without it, they would have no place to go.

The children that satisfied the condition to become a pixie - they are almost non-existent in this country. Except for orphans or artificially made clones.

And then, inside Ayumi the egg that was supposed to give birth to the next Patriarch was buried. From inside there, did a new conscience sprout?

"Aha."

He knows. This is just a prank.

Blurry in his field of vision, just one shadow - that ambiguous thing on which his entire theory was founded is meaningless.

But he's still glad. There is just a slight possibility. There is hope.

Using that he can live.

"…hey, are you really OK?"

Worriedly looking at Ren that started smiling all of a sudden, Ayano asked.

"I'm fine. Let's go. Today i want you to treat me a lot~"

The celebration of graduation, and the celebration of entering another school, an event for the sake of going further he had the feeling that now he can enjoy all that.

In this world where Ayumi died, he will continue to live. But, he will never forget.

About the girl that became his first love. It was only for a short while but she lived eagerly and proudly.

Burdened with everything, she accepted it - and while writhing she lived.

"That's enough, right Ayumi-chan?"

The day he graduated from primary school, Ren knew his first love was over.